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A Community Right to Beauty:

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

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Foreword

by Phillip Blond, Director, ResPublica

Our national policy framework is geared, quite rightly, toward defending the beauty we already have – most notably in rural areas, where protections are in place for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and our physical heritage more broadly. Yet it evades completely the beauty that could be created in the ‘everyday’: in urban and rural communities, and all that sit in between; in our schools, public services and spaces; in our buildings, our walks to work and our wider local infrastructure. Where attempts have been made to give consideration to beauty, public policy too often collapses into consultation and guidance around ‘good design’, which, although important, does not encapsulate quite how holistic and all-encompassing beauty really is.

We argue in this paper that beauty, far from being an abstract and intangible term with no social and economic use, is at its heart a democratic concept, and as such should be discerned, identified and co-created from the bottom up. Polling conducted in partnership with Ipsos MORI for this paper found that those who identify their area as a beautiful place to live, feel healthier, both physically and mentally, and experience lower crime rates. And this is

backed up by more substantive research. Yet it also finds that people’s propensity to identify their local area as beautiful varies with income – for instance, 69% of those satisfied with their household income designated their local area as beautiful, but this was the case for only 53% of those dissatisfied with their household income. The cost of ugliness is high, and it will only get worse if we don’t seek to address it.

Communities need the space, power and incentives to protect, enhance and create beautiful places – and this needs to be driven by the neighbourhood for the neighbourhood. The Community Rights and neighbourhood planning powers delivered to communities through the Localism Act 2011 go some way to facilitating this. But they do not go far enough. People are still facing attitudinal, technical and policy barriers to realising beautiful places in their areas. This is why we came together with our esteemed partners – the National Trust, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Ecclesiastical Insurance, Atlantic Gateway Parklands, the Woodland Trust, Hastoe Housing Association and Civic Voice – to argue for a transformative new right: a Community Right to Beauty.



Introduction

This paper argues for a Community Right to Beauty – a new community right that will give people more powers and incentives to shape, enhance and create beautiful places. In recent years, ‘beauty’ has been considered at best an addendum to public policy; a luxury that sits on the outskirts of social justice and discernment of the common good. But this is to misunderstand its true meaning. Beautiful places exist everywhere – in the urban, the rural, and all that sits in between – and are vital to the social and economic prosperity of a locality.

Beauty is at the heart of what it means to create a just society; it is a major contributor to good health and wellbeing, a strong and participative civil society, local economic growth, safe communities and the overall quality of a place. But also more than this: it is a determining factor and key driver behind the nature and ethos of a given community, to personal and communal connections,

affiliations and emotions, alongside a wealth of inherent value that cannot be reduced to social and economic analysis. Beauty is also and ultimately a democratic concept; discerned personally and locally. It is central to who we are.

Research shows that people highly value beautiful places, spaces and developments, but that access to these, particularly for the least wealthy in society, is limited. Our own polling, conducted in conjunction with Ipsos MORI, found that those most able access beautiful places, spaces and buildings in their local area was highest for households earning more than £45,000 a year. Especially striking is the finding that only 45% of people in social rented property feel they have such access, as opposed to 57% among homeowners. More broadly, barely over half (54%) of all people polled felt they had access of this kind, which is symptomatic of a much wider problem that transcends differences in income and wealth.

The language deployed around aesthetics has limitations too: people perceive the term 'beauty' as having elitist and snobbish connotations, and it is often associated by the public with galleries and museums, only accessible to the wealthy. 'Beauty' as a word has fallen out of use; now more usually deployed by academics, philosophers and architects.

This paper calls for a democratisation of beauty – in its language, use, accessibility and creation – and for communities to be placed at the heart of its discernment and realisation. The cost of ugliness, particularly for those who are the least wealthy in society, is far too high. We argue for a genuine place-based planning policy; for a co-creation of beautiful places between neighbourhoods and local actors; and for the introduction of a local policy infrastructure that will truly enable community-led decision-making to take place.

The existing Community Rights, alongside the other powers delivered in the Localism Act 2011, do not go far enough to offer communities these opportunities. Neither are the fiscal incentives and local frameworks in place to properly support local people in acting on their ambitions and desires for the improvement of their locality, or particular buildings, spaces and places.

We have a unique opportunity. With a new administration and a renewed focus on the importance of devolving power to people and places, now is the time to take such proposals seriously. Now is the time to introduce a Community Right to Beauty.



1. Understanding Beauty

Beauty is a universal yet elusive idea. It inhabits nature, art, music, ideas, and faces, both human and animal alike. It is also to be found in landscapes, created in buildings and spaces, and the natural world within which these sit. Those buildings and spaces, the fabric of our cities and villages, serve many functions, of course – they are homes and offices, roadways and factories, car parks and transit hubs, and they are gardens and parks, where we walk our dogs, play football, jog. But they are not mere packages of space, wrapped in brick, glass, tarmac and greenery. They are sometimes things of beauty that simply make us smile.

Quite what it is that lifts our spirits in this way often feels ineffable. Indeed, to a great extent, as a society we no longer possess a shared language of beauty. So we quickly slip into awkward discussions about style, taste and fashions, or maybe to concerns with the picturesque, to the language of the beauty industry. Beyond this, we are insecure in

expressing a view, for fear of being wrong, found out in our taste or in our ignorance.

Judging something to be beautiful is essentially tied to our personal experience with and in response to it; a pleasure in the form of an object and our interaction with the world and with the associations and meaning we bring to that. Alongside visual appeal, ideas of beauty are woven through our associations with identity, meaning, and memory. We want buildings to be beautiful, not merely for decoration, but because they stand as a symbol for the state of who we are. Beauty is not an abstract concept – it is deeply connected to people and places, to the everyday lives of each of us. It is part of who we are and, as such, is an important public good. Yet one that policy-makers have been wary to engage with on the assumption that it is an entirely subjective quality – something in the eye of the beholder.

Given that it is such a personal experience, it is perhaps surprising that when we describe something as beautiful, we usually expect others to agree. Attempts to capture its essence have been made throughout human history. Plato sought to define beauty objectively, in terms of certain aesthetic qualities. This Classical tradition sees beauty as the harmonious arrangements of parts: for any given thing, only certain proportions of the various parts produced a beautiful form. Another tradition, what could be described as the romantic understanding of beauty, is based on personal experience and insight that is not open to explanation or proof. These two traditions have pulled and entwined in debates about environmental beauty for centuries.

Classical proportions were central to aesthetic theory from the 1600s. This idea of 'beauty as geometry' helped to make the discussion, and even the appreciation, of beauty the business of experts; a little later, the more organic idea of the picturesque, often rooted in landscape, developed and remains a dominant strand of popular British notions of beauty. The tension between these two perspectives was summed up by Christopher Wren, who observed in 1740:

*"There are two causes of beauty, natural and customary. Natural is from geometry, consisting in uniformity (that is equality) and proportion. Customary beauty is begotten by the use of our senses to those objects which are usually pleasing to us for other causes, as familiarity or a particular inclination breed a love to things not in themselves lovely."*¹

The concept of preservation has always had a place in ideas of beauty too, particularly of natural beauty. By the 19th century, Ruskin was arguing that modernity and industrialisation

could only make for ugly places, believing that beauty was most likely to be found in nature and its echoes, rather than the works of modern man. For most of us, beauty is most often found in the natural environment and any approach to promoting beauty needs to view the matter holistically, making the experience of beauty an everyday one, accessible to all: in town and country, street and parkland, in buildings and landscape.

Modernism, with its rejection of the familiar, the particular and the historic, has arguably made it more difficult for many people to appreciate and understand architecture.² It has also made us wary of an elite and theoretical idea of beauty, of the imposition of a *correct* form. The reaction against it makes fertile ground for the view that, when it comes to visual appeal, it really is each to their own. In fact, some would argue that a democratic society is inimical to universal, objective ideas of beauty, which are cast as elitist and snobbish. Where individuals hold divergent views about what is beautiful, there is no simple way to judge whose opinions should hold sway without recourse to the wisdom of the cultural elite.

Yet we know from research that, given time to reflect, most people are capable and confident in talking about their ideas of beauty.³ What is more, the same research found a high degree of commonality about what people find to be beautiful, and where they find it. Overwhelmingly, respondents to this survey said that they found beauty in the natural environment, but also in buildings and parks, in art and music, in people and in fashion.

Our own research found that the most important factors for people in making a local area more beautiful were 'less litter and rubbish'

(chosen by 36% of respondents), 'less crime, vandalism and graffiti' (35%), and 'less vacant and run-down buildings' (23%).⁴ In an earlier study by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and Ipsos MORI, when people were asked to identify beautiful buildings in Sheffield, most cited the two cathedrals, often not because of a stylistic preference, but for reasons related to an appreciation of longevity (history and continuity) and grandeur (craft and ambition). Conversely, many contemporary buildings were described as 'flat-packed' and 'identikit', with little sign of care and investment, built with no ambition for the future, only for immediate gratification or utility. The cheapness of materials and lack of individual character was also cited.

People, then, like places that feel like places, characterised by an identifiable palate of qualities: nature and greenery, but also scale and proportion; light, peacefulness, and distinctiveness, both in the sense of difference and of rootedness in the character of an area – capturing the spirit of a place, either of who we are or who we want to be. The quality of materials used and the standard of upkeep also matter. Both our own research and the CABE research cited above found clear links between dilapidated buildings and perceptions of ugliness, as well as a strong association between places being clean and tidy and being beautiful. The CABE research in particular also found that respondents found it difficult to disassociate things like anti-social behaviour and crime from a general feeling that a place is ugly.

Identifying those factors which help to shape people's relationship with the places they inhabit and so their perceptions of the beauty of those places, is critical to any attempt to encourage the promotion of 'beauty' in the

wider public realm. Beauty is as much about the relationship people have with places and objects as it is with the object itself. And while we should never underestimate the extent to which stylistic taste is subjective, nor should we ignore the objective commonalities in the human appreciation of beauty.

Yet beauty is a quality, and public administration is much more comfortable in the realm of quantity. It is difficult to codify the recipe for beauty and attempts to do so often end simply to soulless failures. This is a clear point of distinction between beauty and good design, which has long been an explicit aspiration within planning and development policy, even if it has been poorly realised in practice. Good design is as much about engineering as visual appeal and as such is more amenable to instrumental judgement.

The current, much slimmed-down National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) retains the commitment to good design in buildings and spaces, and makes reference to the importance of visual appeal, attractiveness and beauty, but submerges them beneath harder-edged considerations, such as viability and sustainability. But the appreciation of beauty is something that is clearly valued by people and, importantly, people expect it for others. In fact, beauty is seen by the English public as a right, rather than a luxury: 81% think that everyone should be able to experience beauty regularly; only 3% disagree.⁵

That is not to say that beauty should take precedence over all other considerations in making decisions about buildings, places and spaces. Energy efficiency, economic viability, accessibility, and simple practicality are all valuable things. However, the fact that beauty

is not always the most important consideration does not mean it should be considered a luxury only to be addressed when the finances allow. And neither does the creation of beautiful places necessarily impose additional costs; small changes and considerations, such as the reduction of roadside clutter, can have just as positive an impact as larger scale developments.

Research by CABE found that while most people did not value beauty more highly than sustainability, functionality or affordability, 28% thought that it should be on par with all three.⁶ Beauty should not trump the other virtues of good places, but it should be an equal and valid consideration in the inevitable trade-offs of planning and development decisions. In a planning system that is geared to local control, we need mechanisms that allow for and support local choice for beauty, putting it on an equal footing with functionality, sustainability and viability.



2. Valuing Beauty - How Beautiful Surroundings Fuel Social Prosperity

To regard beauty simply in instrumental terms is to steal something of its essence: it is not a tool, it is a quality. People are overwhelmingly content to justify their preferences, and even their spending, by appealing to beauty as a reason. It is something we are all disposed to value for its own sake and investing our money, time and skills to shape or create something beautiful makes perfect sense. This is even more so when the investment of resources required to create beauty is small or even negligible, for instance in reducing litter creation. Governments, however, tend to believe and behave differently.

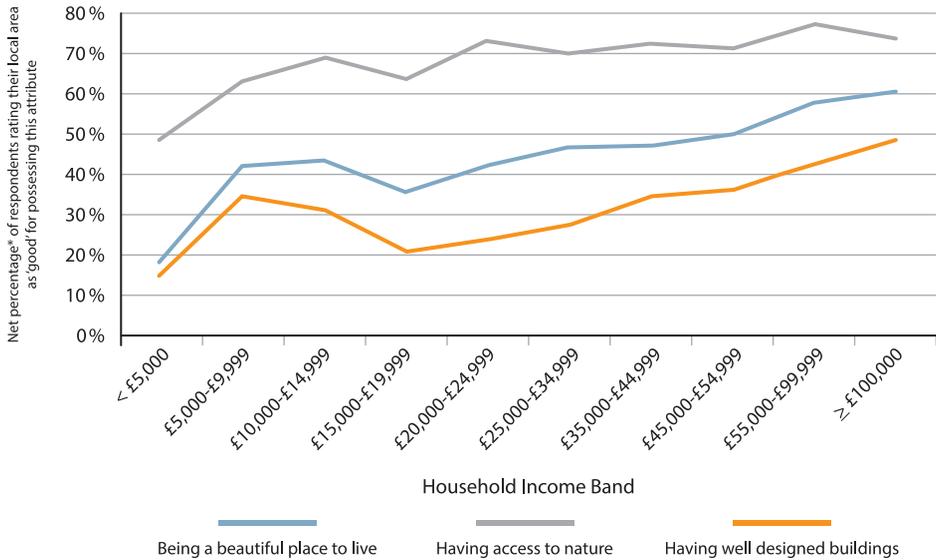
In a politics dominated by a 'value for money' creed, within which value that cannot easily be monetised has no value, beauty's intrinsic worth risks neglect. Even so, in a democratic planning system, increasingly geared towards giving local people greater say over the places they want, people's desire to live in beautiful surroundings deserves a means of expression. Allowing for

informed choices for beauty, even when the benefits can't be counted, is in keeping with the spirit of the times.

Fortunately, there are also good instrumental reasons for promoting beauty in our cities, our towns and villages. Not all can be directly monetised, but the social and economic benefits are clear – particularly for the least wealthy in society.

Our polling demonstrated that people were more likely to rate their local area as 'good' or 'very good' in terms of being a beautiful place to live when their household income was higher. The same trend held for access to green and open spaces. Only 45% of people in social rented property felt that they have access to beautiful places, as opposed to 57% among homeowners. This reflects earlier research: the wealthier you are, the more likely you are to experience beauty, together with all the benefits and value this provides.⁷

Figure 1: Access to Beauty by Household Income



Source: ResPublica / Ipsos MORI poll (2015)

* Net figure calculated by subtracting the percentage of respondents who rated their local area as 'fairly poor' or 'very poor' for access to this attribute from the percentage of respondents who rated their area as 'fairly good' or 'very good'

**Estimates for the < £5,000 and > £100,000 income bands are based on base sizes of less than 100

More broadly, the benefits of beautiful places are significant and diverse. We briefly summarise three particular aspects below:

Economy

We know that people put a price on beauty every day in their consumption choices, whether in where to live, what to wear or what technology they use. Where a choice exists, and where we have the means, each of us will pay more for something we find more pleasing. We know instinctively for example that people pay more to live in areas that are more beautiful – houses in Conservation Areas

are valued more highly and, while beauty is only one consideration next to school places, transport links and services, it remains a significant factor in our spending decisions.

There is little published work on the overall financial and economic impact of beauty *per se*, not least because it has been overlooked by policy-makers as a quality in its own right. But much research has been undertaken over the years to assess the economic benefits of attractive, green and well-designed buildings and spaces, as well as the natural environment.

At a broad level, there is a compelling economic imperative for cities in particular to embrace beauty to realise tangible economic benefits. This stems from the finding that an area's attractiveness is a crucial factor in the choices made by high skilled workers when deciding whether to move to that area. For example, in a survey carried out in 2006 by the academic Richard Florida and others in collaboration with Gallup, university graduates cited the aesthetic qualities of cities as the most important factor in shaping their decision of where to live.⁸

Florida's previous work has also noted the importance of amenities with strong aesthetic associations such as parks, green spaces and walkable neighbourhoods in encouraging people to locate and remain in particular urban locations.⁹ Beauty represents, in the words of the Canadian designer Bruce Mau, a 'competitive strategy', which cities can use to 'attract wealth, talent and investment' and so drive forward local regeneration and fuel widespread prosperity.¹⁰

Property prices are the economic variables on which the effect of beauty is perhaps most easily quantifiable. An Urban Land Institute study of over 10,000 housing transactions in four pairs of housing developments in the United States revealed an average sales premium of 11% on the well-designed schemes.¹¹ There is also good evidence to show that proximity to nature, including well-managed parks and green spaces, increases the value of housing. For example, in the towns of Emmen, Appeldoorn and Leiden in the Netherlands, it has been shown that a view of a park can raise house prices by 8%, and having a park nearby by 6%.¹²

Yet well-designed buildings can promote other economic benefits besides an uplift in property prices. These include greater saleability

(reducing the economically unproductive cost from time spent property hunting), and reduced whole life costs associated with the property,¹³ as well as increased public support for new developments. For example, research has previously shown that 73% of people would support the building of more homes if well-designed and in keeping with their local area.¹⁴

Studies have also established a positive relationship between good office design (in terms of both ergonomics but also external appearance) and business performance in terms of factors which affect productivity such as staff absenteeism and concentration.¹⁵ By contrast, poor design has been found to incur additional costs: it has disincentivised vital infrastructure investment in the wider urban area and reduced the speed at which urban regeneration and the benefits it brings can take place.¹⁶

For retailers, a good quality public environment can improve trading by attracting more people into an area. It has been shown, for example, that well-planned improvements to public spaces within town centres can boost commercial trading by up to 40% and generate significant private sector investment.¹⁷ The local economy also benefits greatly from well-preserved heritage sites and properties: evidence presented to the Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment by English Heritage claimed that of every £1 spent on a heritage visit, 68p is spent in local amenities such as restaurants, hotels and shops and only 32p on the site itself.¹⁸

The economic benefits of green spaces, plants and trees, in both rural and urban settings, has also been well documented. Research has for example found that owners of small businesses rank parks and open spaces as their first priority

when deciding where to relocate;¹⁹ parks and green spaces managed by UK authorities generated £1.1 billion of revenue in 2006;²⁰ and the parks system in Denver was estimated to contribute \$18 million through tourism alone in 2009.²¹ A recent report found that the total value of UK woodland to society was in the region of £270 billion, on the basis of factors including air pollution mitigation, climate change mitigation, and the direct value of goods and services produced by or in woodlands.²²

Health and Wellbeing

Attractive public spaces, streets as much as parks and gardens, are important factors in both physical and mental health. Research in a number of cities has found that 'more attractive streets and pathways' and 'more attractive public parks and greenspaces' were most often cited as changes that would encourage people to undertake healthy lifestyle activities such as walking, vying with safety as the top priority.²³

We know that experiencing natural beauty both reduces stress and promotes wellbeing.²⁴ Studies have for instance identified the important role that roadside trees and green vegetation can play in reducing commuter stress.²⁵ This is reinforced by the findings of more recent research, which found that beauty was associated with both wellbeing and self-esteem, and ugliness conversely with depression.²⁶

David Halpern's *Mental Health and the Built Environment: More Than Bricks and Mortar*²⁷ remains the classic text linking the quality of the built environment and mental health. In the book, Halpern demonstrates a clear connection between the quality of the immediate environment, over and above other factors, and people's mental health.

Further evidence of the importance of the physical environment in this regard comes from the 'Healthy Sustainable Me' programme, which took place in Glasgow from 2008 to 2011. The course worked with young people aged 16-25 and asked them to explore 'the connection between where they live and how they feel';²⁸ providing a platform for planners to engage more proactively with local communities. All of the young people involved reported a significant improvement in their mental wellbeing over the duration of the course, and over half of those on medication at the start of the course were able to come off that medication by the end of the three years. As the political salience of mental health rises and alternatives to drug therapies are sought and promoted, the quality of place and the presence of beauty should not be overlooked.

Of course, beauty is not a panacea. Recent research by the University of Exeter found that the effect of being employed as opposed to unemployed had ten times as much impact on people's mental health as simply living in greener areas.²⁹ But while the effect of high quality environments for any one person might be small, the University's research suggests that the potential benefits for society at large might be substantial, making programmes to promote green spaces cost effective. The research does not prove that moving to a greener area will necessarily increase happiness, but it does fit with findings from other studies, which show that short bouts of time in a green space can improve people's mood and cognitive functioning.³⁰

Our polling found significant discrepancies in respondents' satisfaction with their mental and physical health. Those who rated their local area as 'good' or 'very good' in terms of being

Figure 2: Beauty and Physical Health

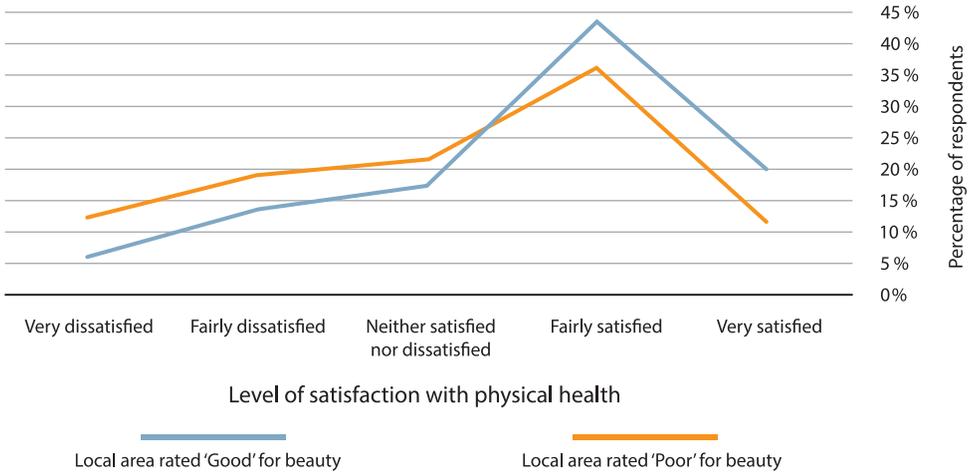
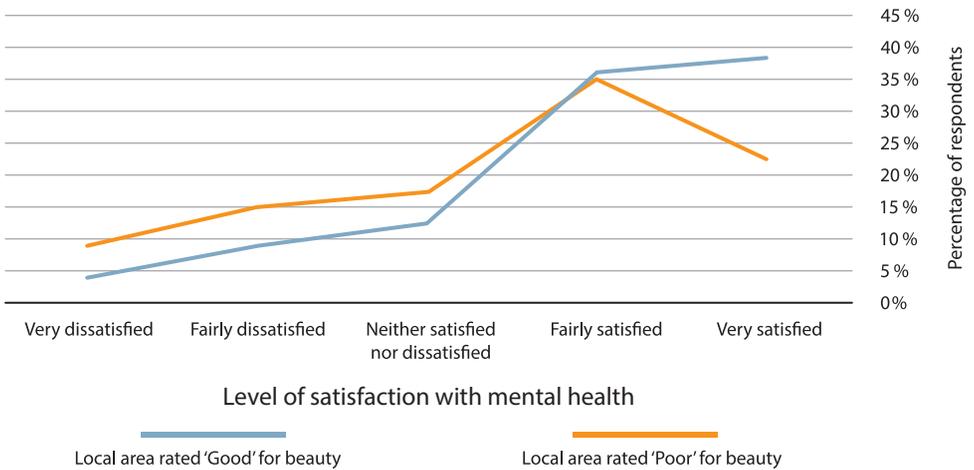


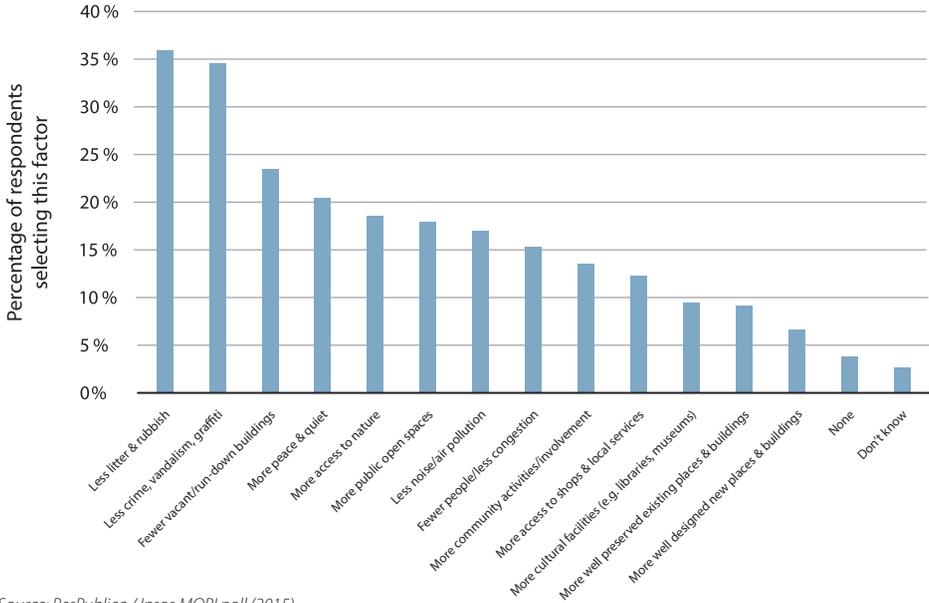
Figure 3: Beauty and Mental Health



Source: ResPublica / Ipsos MORI poll (2015)

Residents who ranked their area as 'good' or 'very good' for being a beautiful place to live are more likely to be satisfied with both their physical and mental health

Figure 4: Factors Considered Most Important* in Making a Local Area More Beautiful



Source: ResPublica / Ipsos MORI poll (2015)

* Respondents were asked to select two or three factors from a list of options

a beautiful place to live were significantly more satisfied with their physical and mental health than those who rated the beauty of their local area as ‘fairly poor’ or ‘very poor’. The respective gaps were even more pronounced between those who responded ‘tend to agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ when asked whether they could access beautiful buildings, places and spaces whenever they wanted in their local area and those who responded ‘tend to disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’.

Civic Engagement and Quality of Community

Attractive environments can also result in gains to civil society. Beautiful places can prompt greater community satisfaction, strengthened social networks and higher levels of social capital.³¹ Participants in ethnographic research in Sheffield also believed that beauty was important in fostering civic pride, and in signalling and generating respect for places and, by extension, the people that live there.³² That sense of self-respect and respectfulness of others and of place meant that littering and other damage was less likely to occur. Making space for beauty also allows for places of congregation and the

development of a common language for united community action.

General quality of place – its cleanliness, levels of clutter, crime and safety – is also a key contributing factor to the flourishing of communities. We know from research that people like clean, green and clutter-free areas, well-maintained and occupied buildings, low crime rates and high safety levels. As noted above our own polling found that, when asked to pick the three most important factors in contributing to beauty in their local area, the most popular choices were less litter and rubbish, less crime, vandalism and graffiti, and less vacant or run-down buildings. These are three factors intuitively closely associated with the quality of place people experience in their everyday lives.

There is also some evidence that well-designed areas, capable of inspiring civic pride, can lead to better standards of maintenance and reduced anti-social behaviour which help to improve people's perceptions of the quality of their neighbourhood. For instance, 'micro-adjustments to public spaces' to ensure that more areas are maintained and not left abandoned have been cited as important factors in reducing local crime and vandalism.³³ The same logic applies to more minor acts which serve to decrease the quality of the local public realm, including littering.

Using considerations of beauty (widely understood) to shape places also helps to create a sense of pride and pleasure engendered by our experience of the significant uniqueness of the natural and built environment around us. This can be referenced for instance by the 'spirit of place' created in locations such as Margate, attributable to

attractions like the Turner Gallery, which in turn helps to cultivate a sense of local character. This sense is valuable in and of itself, yet it is also likely to feed into heightened feelings of security and satisfaction which accompany the feeling of belonging to a high quality, distinctive community and place, as well as engagement in civic debates on how best to preserve and extend that character.

Beauty is only one factor to be weighed against a number of other competing concerns, and it is not a silver bullet. But a proper acknowledgement of the evidence around its potential instrumental value at least makes it harder to overlook in this regard. Yet we should be wary too about resting the case for beauty on extrinsic value alone, not least because the instrumental value is often a function of the intrinsic: it is because we value beauty for its own sake that many of the other benefits arise. To focus solely on the social and economic benefits that derive from beauty is perhaps to close ourselves off from its true importance.

Figure 5: Beauty and Street Cleanliness

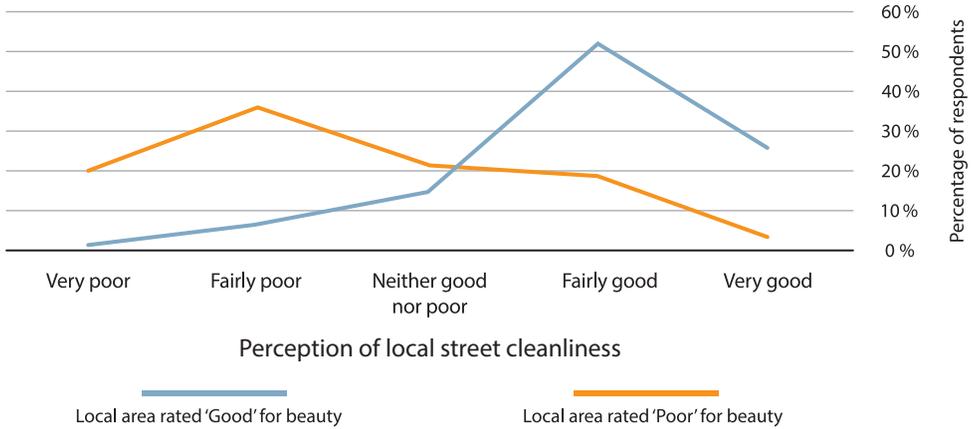
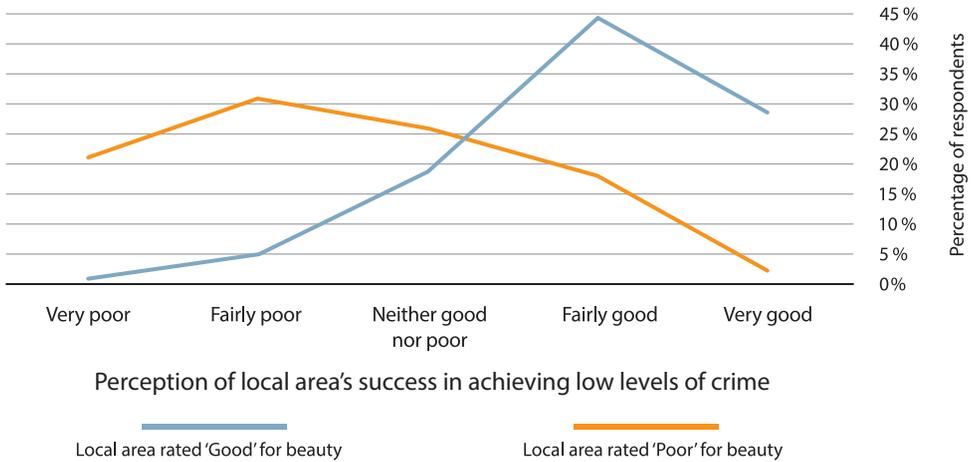


Figure 6: Beauty and Local Crime Levels



Source: ResPublica / Ipsos MORI poll (2015)
 Respondents in more beautiful local areas perceive greater street cleanliness and experience lower crime levels in their locality



3. Barriers to Beauty

Given that beauty is so highly valued and creates important extrinsic value, why do we not see it everywhere? While some places are endowed with substantial riches, others are less fortunate. Our poll for instance finds both social and geographic splits in access to beauty. Among respondents with household income between £15,000 and £20,000, satisfaction with the beauty of the local area was over 13 percentage points lower than among respondents of household income over £100,000. Geographically, satisfaction with the beauty of the local area was almost 30 percentage points higher in the South West than in the Midlands.³⁴ Why has planning and development policy failed us so markedly?

There are protections, of course, available to places of exceptional beauty. The word even appears explicitly in policy, in the designation of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Created by The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, AONBs

offer the same protection on account of their visual appeal as that offered to National Parks, and are applied to places too small to justify the governance structures of an Authority; designations are made by the Secretary of State on advice from Natural England, the Natural Resources Wales and Environment Agency Northern Ireland; in Scotland, the equivalent National Scenic Areas (NSAs) are designated by the devolved government on advice from Scottish Natural Heritage.

Yet it is often only in the countryside that beauty is politically acknowledged, *"because everyone agrees that it's wonderful and wants to preserve it. Move into towns and cities, however, and no one is confident of commanding such a consensus"*.³⁵ Protections here are for historic buildings and spaces – individual buildings can be listed for their architectural merit and, with the creation of Conservation Areas in 1967, historic buildings in England and Wales can be protected in a setting, perhaps consisting of several streets,

with their trees and landscapes as well as the buildings themselves, if they possess “*the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*” (Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Sections 69 and 70). There are even protections for specific and significant views, through Supplementary Planning Guidance, in a number of cities. Not all of these designations are consistently or appropriately applied, of course; moreover, while each contains a component of visual appeal, beauty is not the primary motivator.

It is also clear that these measures have essentially been a largely defensive position, marking out the exceptional for preservation and then engaging in a long war of attrition to secure its survival, rather than to make the case for the creation of new beauty within our towns and cities. New instances of urban beauty have appeared, of course, but only by way of enlightened developers driven by visionary planners, and sometimes by sheer chance. The ambition for the visual appeal of new development has existed within the planning system for some time, and continues to do so. But it has been subsumed into ideas of ‘good design’, which itself has so often been relegated behind other considerations.

One consequence of this has been a deepening distributional imbalance. By protecting the already beautiful without sufficiently promoting new beauty, poorer places tend to get less of it, and instead take on a greater proportion of ugly development. The absence of exceptional buildings, spaces and green places ratchets down the quality of new development brought forward and lowers the expectations of planners and communities; the Neighbourhood Planning powers contained within the Localism Act 2011 have thus far been taken up unevenly and this

risks further entrenching the gap between beautiful places and ugly ones. That policy only functions – albeit imperfectly – in protecting the exceptional, exacerbates this effect further.

There are some class and educational differences here, with those in higher social and educational categories much more likely to have experienced beauty in their lives.³⁶ This matters in terms of equity, but also because it is only through exposure to high quality environments that we develop the language to demand more from new buildings and spaces. More fundamentally, the ugliness of areas where many poor people live serves as an indicator of the low value society places on their well-being. People in the CABE research felt strongly that beauty should be accessible to all and that the current distribution was too skewed to people able to buy access to it; the social and geographical discrepancies revealed in our own poll suggest there is some truth to this view. Wider access to beauty would contribute to overall welfare and the building of a ‘good society’.

Our ability to adequately protect existing beauty and to find ways to promote new instances of it, replenishing our stock of cherished places, is limited both by attitudinal and technical barriers.

Attitudinal barriers

Perhaps the biggest barrier to a ‘pro-beauty’ policy framework is the general mind-set that sees beauty as costly and unaffordable. We know from the research that the public do not regard beauty as a luxury, and yet policy-makers and the public alike are wary of the assumed frivolous nature of this debate, afraid to frame questions of visual appeal with the same importance as hard economics.

In part, this is a familiar British wariness of 'culture', but it is a wariness that has transformed into an austerity-era rejection of needless decorative expense. When given the space to think about beauty, people attach the kind of importance to it that is reflected in their consumption choices. But we lack the confidence to demand beauty in public life and the understandable focus on growth and cost-cutting means we have become used to cutting out embellishments. Much of the ambition to make our urban and rural environment beautiful has gone, along with the extra care and attention to detail which can transform the ordinary into the beautiful and the ubiquitous into something special.

In large part, this is because the word has fallen out of use, except in specific and fragmented fields, and where it has been colonised by the cosmetics industry. Fundamentally, we have lost an effective common language of beauty as a quality. This is anchored in our poor visual literacy and in the very few examples of what good looks like, except in historic buildings. People need to be more in tune with their ability to tap into and access beauty, to have a language for beauty and to have regular, direct experience of it – through beautiful areas, places and spaces where they live, travel and work.

At the same time, Britain has developed a mistrust of and ambivalence towards expert judgements about beauty, in part a legacy of the experience of postwar Modernism, in part a result of a class-bound elitism around aesthetic appreciation. People have been told what is beautiful, and have internalised their disagreement as lack of understanding or resentment. Beauty is seen as something of an arcane lore, elitist and alienating, or else is seen as inherently subjective, reduced to an unnavigable set of styles and taste.

Technical barriers

The same problem of articulation has affected both national and local policy-makers, who are more comfortable in the realm of the quantifiable and codifiable. Indeed, the planning system has developed around the language of codes and standards, but beauty is *"both concrete and abstract, nameable and quantifiable, and impossible to name or to quantify"*.³⁷ The resistance of beauty to bureaucratic language has been in particular a barrier to the active creation of more beautiful places or to enhance those that already exist than it has to preservation, where the fact of designation clears up any ambiguity.

Protecting existing beauty is essential; it is also popular. Our poll found that while removing litter and rubbish was cited as one of the most important factors in improving an area's beauty by 36% of respondents, only 7% felt the same way about new places and buildings that are well designed.³⁸ However, there are many places which lack any beauty at all and a new right to conserve alone will have profound distributional impacts, exacerbating existing drivers that foist 'ugly' development on poorer places. It also leaves us unable to replenish our stock of beautiful places; places that say something about who we are now.

Furthermore, preservation, without a countervailing mechanism for promoting new beauty, can all too easily be cast simply as a tool to argue against any development. That is a difficult proposition for a pro-beauty policy framework in the context of a government that is seeking to encourage development for other social and economic reasons. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to creating a policy framework that takes beauty seriously is the fear that it

would simply inhibit development, rather than improve it. Our contention here is that the status quo, where imperfect preservation is all we have, is more likely to lead to an anti-development sentiment in communities.

There are also very real pressures on the resources of government, especially local government. Between 2009/10 and 2012/13 alone, local authority planning services lost almost 50% of their funding.³⁹ And the Heritage Lottery Fund, which did so much to fund the refurbishment of our historic parks, warned last year that cuts to council funding threatened to erode the progress made since the 1990s.⁴⁰ Without identifying new resources and new energy, there will be real challenges simply in applying the protections that already exist, let alone extending them.

There are of course already a number of 'pro-beauty' instruments in the policy framework; the Localism Act 2011 further introduced a set of important Community Rights and the consequent National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) includes positive reference to "*visually attractive*" places. Yet to date these provisions remain insufficient for the task, primarily because beauty is only ever a side dish to the main priorities of policy. Planning policy is geared first to economic viability, then sustainability (good things in themselves, but always pre-ordinate to concerns with beauty and the character of a place); and the grounds from registering Assets of Community Value under the Community Right to Bid are largely instrumental, concerned with social utility. Beautiful places *could* be protected or enhanced under these provisions, but beauty is such a poorly understood quality that it will almost always be sub-ordinate to other considerations without explicit measures to put it on an equal footing with society's other priorities.

Additionally, although Neighbourhood Planning is gaining momentum, there are still only around 60 Neighbourhood Plans in place and fewer than 1500 communities, containing just six million actively engaged in the process.⁴¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of these places are more affluent and rural or suburban: Arun District Council in West Sussex is home to ten of the sixty completed Plans, and only one London Borough, Kensington and Chelsea, has seen the conclusion of a Plan. We need a mechanism that engages a wider demographic, and that truly devolves power to all people and their places.

We have seen that people are willing and able to talk about the beauty they would like to see in their local area when they are given the space to do so. We also know that there are financial and economic benefits to be secured. But the above factors mean that architects and developers, planners and crafts-people are not rewarded for creating beautiful places – the policy and fiscal incentives are not in place. In the next chapter, we set out a programme of measures to rectify that, and to address the other barriers outlined here.



4. A Community Right to Beauty: Conclusions and Recommendations

Without a wider and more robust policy framework for protecting and promoting beautiful places, civil society will be diminished, consent for development will be withheld, important health gains will be forsaken, and a more active civic life will not develop. Crucially, the distributional impacts of unequal beauty will be further entrenched. The cost of ugliness, particularly for those who are the least wealthy in society, is simply far too high.

Yet much conspires against taking beauty seriously in much of policy making, which is more comfortable in dealing with the easily quantifiable. The pursuit of beauty is bound to be contentious and deeply entwined with political debate. People often disagree about what is beautiful, but this is not a fact unique to beauty; subjectivity is found in other areas of public policy and it is dealt with. If beauty cannot be meaningfully codified, it can be negotiated. The right to beauty we propose in

this paper is therefore the right to negotiate for beauty and for that negotiation to have weight.

Steps have been taken to ensure that beauty and good design play a more central role in public policy and in the 'every day', beyond what is already legislated to protect existing natural beauty and Britain's heritage. The HS2 Design Panel established earlier this year, is set to advise on all buildings and spaces associated with the infrastructure project. The Rt Hon John Hayes MP, when Minister at the Department for Transport, established a similar mechanism to advise Highways England on the design of their roads.⁴² Government has also welcomed Sir Terry Farrell's review of architecture and design in the build environment, the recommendations from which continues to unfold.⁴³ And the Conservative Manifesto has committed the current administration to further protecting and enhancing the natural environment,

and ensuring the country 'remains the most beautiful in the world'.⁴⁴

But, welcomed though they are, these and other Government-led interventions are, at the end of the day, Government-led. They are top-down, singular interventions that emerge from different Whitehall departments; departments that are often themselves siloed from one another and which rarely interact. This approach does not put communities at the heart of shaping their local places. It encourages codification from the top, rather than co-creation from the bottom. We need an enabling policy framework by which democracy is returned to our planning policy.⁴⁵ We need to create the space for communities come together; and as research has shown, when communities come together, people are ready and willing to engage.⁴⁶

There are opportunities. The Government's leadership on devolution to cities and local authorities offers both the immediate and long-term space for such a debate to take place. Local government will have more by way of powers to in turn empower their own communities. Where fiscal devolution takes place, they will also have control over the social and financial 'nudges' in order to put the right incentives in place. More broadly, cities and local authorities will be able to forward a far more ambitious and strategic direction – one that is both holistic in its approach and bottom-up in its realisation. If we properly tap into this opportunity, people will have the power to link the shaping of beautiful places with local welfare, employment, health and wellbeing.

We can also turn to the planning system. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is less prescriptive than the previous guidance

framework, and is less reliant on centrally-constructed codes and standards. It also contains sections which could be interpreted to support the protection and promotion of beautiful places, although these provisions remain subordinate to the dominant viability test. But the planning system could well be evolving, through Neighbourhood Planning, into one based around the genuine engagement of people in shaping their own places.

The critical question is whether it is possible to have a civic debate about these differences in ways that are a productive negotiation rather than a clash of tastes. That means that communities need to be supported to enter negotiations in the constructive and empowered way, to define their own expectations of beauty and identify the character of their place that they want to see enhanced.

Fortunately there is a burgeoning arsenal of tools available to help, from the application of traditional ideas like charrettes to Planning For Real exercises, from area character appraisals to new online tools, such as Commonplace.⁴⁷ Government funding is available for Parish Councils and neighbourhood forums to help with neighbourhood planning - £22.5 million has been allocated for 2015 to 2018 to provide community groups with expert advice, grant funding and technical assistance to get neighbourhood plans and orders from their inception to their coming into force following a local referendum. In addition to this, in areas where there is a neighbourhood development plan in place, the neighbourhood will be able receive 25% of the revenues from the Community Infrastructure Levy arising from the development that they have chosen to accept.

Neighbourhood Planning is also gaining momentum, and Neighbourhood Forums are facilitating the space for communities to come together to make strategic planning decisions. But as outlined in the previous chapter, Neighbourhood Forums are neither widespread enough, nor as powerful as they need to be, in order to give communities the opportunity to both shape and manage their local places. Additional powers, incentives and wider points of access are urgently needed.

A Community Right to Beauty

We believe that a new Community Right to Beauty should be granted to Neighbourhood Forums or the appropriate devolved authority where a Neighbourhood Forum does not exist – namely Town and Parish Councils. As such, we recommend that the new Community Right – along with its connected powers and incentives outlined in detail below – be seriously considered as an addition to the anticipated amendments to the Localism Act 2011.⁴⁸

It will be important to frame the new Community Right in a way that does not simply give an easy veto over all development – beauty does not necessarily trump other considerations, and utility and economics, as well as environmental sustainability, are vitally important in making decisions about planning and development. But if the visual appeal of places is ever to have a fair hearing in every locality, not just those currently privileged in terms of aesthetic and/or financial assets, then policy needs to be explicit in bringing it to the table. The Community Right to Beauty should be underpinned by four principles. It should give communities the power to:

- Democratically challenge new development on the grounds of beauty; not in order to prevent development, but to enhance its visual appeal;
- Call for the improvement of derelict, void or unsightly buildings and spaces (including parks, green spaces, plants and trees), and take on the ownership or management of such assets to accelerate this process;
- Protect, maintain and improve local cherished, beautiful buildings and green spaces especially where there is no existing protection in legislation; and
- Genuinely shape, preserve and enhance their local area, beyond that which is already available through the Localism Act 2011.

A Community Right to equal access and enjoyment of beauty in all places – from the rural to the urban, and all that sits between – would be a real step forward. In practical terms, it would make more widely available some of the protections that already exist for extraordinary places. Furthermore, it would also help to promote the creation of new beauty and to make more beautiful what already exists, especially in those many places where beauty is in short supply.

In order to put these principles into practice, the following policy recommendations would together constitute the new Community Right to Beauty:

[1.] Make beauty a material consideration in planning and development policy:

While the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out an aspiration for development to create “a strong sense of place, using streetscapes and buildings to create attractive and comfortable places to live, work and visit”, that “respond to local character and history” and “are visually attractive as a result of good architecture”, it is simply a framework. It is not sufficiently strong to drive a large-scale re-evaluation of the importance of beauty in the planning system. To give beauty a stronger emphasis in relation to other considerations, we recommend the following minor amendments to the NPPF:

1. Under Core Planning Principles, amend the fourth bullet of para 17, so that it reads:

“Planning should:

- always seek to secure high quality design, **create beautiful places**, and provide a good standard of amenity for all existing and future occupants of land and buildings.”

2. Under Requiring Good Design, amend the sixth bullet point under para 58, so that it reads:

“Ensure that developments:

- are visually attractive as a result of good architecture and appropriate landscaping **and protect or enhance the beauty of an area.**”

3. Under Conserving and Enhancing the Natural Environment, amend the first bullet point under para 109, so that it reads:

“The planning system should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

- protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, **natural beauty**, geological conservation interests and soils;”

4. Finally, under Plan Making, Local Plans, insert a new bullet at para 156 that reads:

“Local planning authorities should set out the strategic priorities for the area in the Local Plan. This should include strategic policies to deliver:

- **places of urban and natural beauty that enhance the character and visual appeal of an area.**”

In addition, to support these amendments, **a new paragraph should be added to the Policy Practice Guidance**, amending paragraph 21 (‘A well designed space is attractive’), so that it outlines more explicitly the importance of beauty in creating successful places and how that might be reflected in plans.

This approach should be based on the democratisation of aesthetics, rather than a codification of beauty; that is, it should create the framework for negotiating beauty at a local and neighbourhood level, rather than establish a check-list of standards. We

have argued in this paper that beauty is not wholly subjective, that visual appeal is most often shared in common. However, codes of this kind tend towards the reductive: the requirement for new buildings in Bath to be faced in the local stone has not prevented the construction of some banal residential tower blocks. Where there is disagreement about what is beautiful, mechanisms and incentives need to be put in place to enable democratic discernment. In other words, we need to create the conditions for communities to come together and make decisions on what would improve their local place.

Although Neighbourhood Forums and Town and Parish Councils already in principle provide this role, they neither genuinely reflect the diversity of the community, nor do they provide the space and expertise to make decisions quickly. Decisions surrounding local development and place-shaping are therefore often cumbersome and long-winded, which puts many people off engaging with the process.

To directly respond to these concerns, and to re-enforce the principle of democracy in the planning system, we recommend the **introduction of local Citizens' Juries**. The Citizens' Jury model is a means deployed in Australia and elsewhere to draw together a representative group of people from a given neighbourhood via a stratified sample of those on the electoral roll. A Citizens' Jury, the creation of which would be triggered by local residents, would provide communities with the tools, support and the access to experienced experts and skilled professionals over time to enable them to come to a decision and conclude with their recommendations. The Jury could either be triggered where there is widespread concern or disagreement over a

particular area or development, or simply to facilitate and expediate the coming together of a Neighbourhood Plan. For the latter, the Citizens' Jury would be support to identify: their community ethos and what makes their area beautiful; where the opportunities lie to improve and enhance beauty in their area; and finally, how the community can harness the Community Right and other powers available to them, in partnership with local public and private actors, in order to make this happen. This must be a community-led but expert-supported process, working within a defined public budget, and the local authority should be bound to adopt the Jury's conclusions and recommendations.

We recommend that the model is piloted in the first instance and then **funded in the long term by a model of Land Value Capture**, the mechanism which recovers some of the value generated through public investment in local infrastructure. This funding should also be deployed to enable cities, local authorities and councils to provide access to the wealth of experience and knowledge on place-making and design available both locally and nationally.

[2.] Designate buildings, spaces and places as sites to both preserve and develop new beauty:

A new designation of Areas of Outstanding Urban Beauty should extend the principles of the 1949 Act from the natural to the built environment, going beyond the narrow historicism of Conservation Areas to allow for changes that improve the visual appeal of places rather than simply perpetuating what the past has bequeathed to us. The Greater London National Park campaign is an interesting example of where citizens have called for the area's official recognition as a National Park,

because of the region's bio-diversity and ranging urban habitats.⁴⁹ For those places currently without much in the way of visual appeal, **Community Improvement Districts** (based on the Business Improvement District model) should be established with the explicit objective of creating beautiful places. These Districts should have a wide-ranging scope in order to reflect the priorities of a given community. If a given place has a particular problem with litter, for example, such districts should proactively engage with the community, local authority and other local partners in introducing preventative measures and in assisting in the management of Litter Abatement Orders.

In both of these new designated zones, proposed new development would be subject to proper community consultation, including scrutiny in accordance with an area's Neighbourhood Plan. To facilitate this, architects and developers should be given the space to physically display their plans, models and proposals for any new local developments, which should then be subject to a **design competition and local vote. Communities should have the power to choose their preferred design and developer** in line with what they believe will contribute most to the beauty and ethos of their locality and deliver the greatest community value. We believe that this will facilitate greater community engagement in the planning process, and accelerate agreement on plans for future development.

Within and beyond these areas, the Government should allow certain buildings, areas and spaces of local importance to be designated for preservation or improvement by introducing a **new class on the Community Asset register: 'local beauty assets'**. The designated buildings or spaces would then be eligible for specific

fiscal incentives (see below), creating a coalition of interest in favour of that preservation or improvement between property owners and the community so that designation is not only sought in places that are already beautiful.

The Community Right to Reclaim Land should also be extended to include buildings and spaces to enable communities to challenge local councils and other public bodies to improve derelict, void or unsightly developments and areas, or to release such assets to enable the community to improve them.⁵⁰ Through the forthcoming Housing and Planning Bill, **local authorities should be required to register not only brownfield land, as is currently proposed, but also unused or underused buildings and spaces** to make clear for communities the assets that could be challenged for improvement via the above measures. Where public land or development remains unused, **the community should have the right to buy or use the asset in a way that will most benefit the neighbourhood.** For example, an unused piece of land could be converted into a community garden, created by local people. This would increase a sense of local ownership and control, improve the look of the area, and decrease the levels of vandalism, litter and crime that derelict and unoccupied sites often attract. If sold to a private buyer, **any increased financial value accrued from the community-led improvement should be reinvested into the Neighbourhood Forum or local Town and Parish Council.** Tricorn House in Stroud is an example of where a community have consistently called for the eyesore's improvement, but have struggled to purchase the site.

[3.] Introduce the right fiscal incentives:

While planning guidance and area designations can be powerful drivers of improvements in the visual appeal of buildings and places, fiscal incentives for improving derelict, void or unsightly buildings and spaces would underpin these measures considerably as well as release the funding for developers and others to invest in such refurbishment and in creating new incidences of beauty. Where local people have voted for a preferred design and developer for new buildings, **a reduction on the tax that would be levied on the development via Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 should be applied.** To incentivise improvement in the visual appeal of specific individual buildings, spaces and places, where recommended by the community, **point relief on Capital Gains Tax could alternatively be used.**

Similarly, although currently limited by EU legislation, we recommend that in the long-term, **a partial VAT relief on refurbishment costs** (for example, from 20% to 10%) should apply where developers and owners can justify, through community engagement, the claim that the work would enhance or maintain the visual appeal of buildings and spaces.⁵¹ **A further reduction in VAT from 20% to 5% should apply if the building in question is listed as a 'Local Beauty Asset'** in the manner set out above.⁵² Currently, VAT is payable on the refurbishment of existing property, but not on new build, which is zero rated. Clearly this incentivises demolition and rebuilding over making improvements to existing, often highly prized buildings. There are some reductions, for example, for measures to improve the energy efficiency of buildings, but by and large the incentives work against investment in improving the visual appeal of existing stock.

The heritage sector and those interested in good design in the built environment have long argued for less disparity in the VAT rates.⁵³ Government has usually resisted these arguments on the grounds that it would either introduce dead weight costs or disincentivise development, and there are good financial and economic grounds for this; furthermore, not all refurbishment improves visual appeal, so a general equalisation or reduction would not necessarily drive the behaviours we want to see. The EU also currently limits the VAT reductions that can be implemented to a particular list of exempted items and a particular type of building – privately owned – which presents a major barrier to enabling such incentives to be introduced. However, as we have argued in this report, the gains here are far more than the economic, and we believe that in the long-term, change at an EU level is clearly the right move.

In order to further incentivise neighbourhood-led improvements, and widespread community engagement in this process, Government should introduce a **'Beauty Gain' earn-back model** as part of the next generation of devolution deals, where Neighbourhood Forums and Town and Parish Councils are enabled to retain some of the proceeds of economic growth and social benefits that accrue from an area's improving visual appeal. The means by which this is done at a relatively small scale should be the subject of further research.⁵⁴ We recommend that the assessment of value on which this is based must be holistic: its scope should include all aspects that contribute to making a place beautiful, working within the community's understanding of beauty, value and local ethos, which could range from reduced litter levels and more trees and green spaces, to the provision of certain services and the use of local trade and skills.

If the value of property in the area increases as a result of improvements made over time, a proportion of this financial gain should also be captured and **re-invested into the Neighbourhood Forum or Town and Parish Council to further improve, develop and maintain the look and shape of the locality. Business Rates Retention**, which exists to incentivise councils to pursue economic growth, **should also be extended to recognise the uplift that comes from development that is beautiful**, rather than merely functional, where this is an explicit priority.

As individuals and as communities, we are remarkably good at recognising beauty and tend towards agreement about what we find beautiful and ugly. We also value beauty, with most of us willing to pay a premium for beauty in our consumption choices. Yet, planning and development policy does not currently allow us to demand beautiful places beyond limited protections for what already exists. And because there is no arena to discuss it, we as a nation have become reticent in articulating that desire. A Community Right to Beauty, underpinned by planning guidance and fiscal incentives and supported by facilitation of community engagement, can help us to rediscover a language of beauty that can invigorate our attachment to place and community, and truly democratise its discernment, use and creation in the everyday. As this report has demonstrated, failure to recognise the value of beautiful places is economically and socially damaging, but to do so will unlock a multitude of benefits for communities across the UK.



Endnotes

- 1 Christopher Wren (1750), 'Parentalia'.
- 2 The integration of natural beauty and light into modern architecture, for example through picture windows and the inclusion of planting within and through modern buildings, is largely overlooked in the popular imagination, lost behind drab concrete.
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- 43 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2014) *The Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment*. London: The Stationery Office.
- 44 *The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015*, p.54.
- 45 For more on the need to return democracy to the planning process, see the Bartlett School of Planning's 'Five Radical Ideas for a Better Planning System' (University College London): <http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/planning/five-radical-ideas>.
- 46 The Ipsos MORI 2010 research ('People and places: Public attitudes to beauty'), when honing in on Sheffield, found that if people were given the space, they felt more able to engage with the concept of beauty.
- 47 <http://commonplace.is/>
- 48 A review of the powers devolved to communities via the Localism Act 2011 is expected to be undertaken in Autumn 2015, after which amendments are expected to be made to the Act itself.
- 49 <http://www.greaterlondonnationalpark.org.uk/>

50 Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act (1990) gives local authorities this power, but not communities.

51 A partial relief could, for example, be a reduction in VAT from 20% to 10%. We recommend that Government undertake a review to assess where the partial relief should be set.

52 This is the maximum VAT reduction permitted for certain materials and building types (privately owned) under [European Union Directive 2009/47/EC amendment] Annex III of the VAT Directive 2006/112/EC.

53 See, for example, 'Cut the VAT' Alliance, led by the Federation of Master Builders (<http://www.fmb.org.uk/news-publications/newsroom/campaigns/cut-the-vat/>), and the Heritage Alliance's Manifesto and Supplementary Briefing: <http://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/supplementary-briefing-value-added-taxation/>. This measure has also been called for by those who promote good design in the built environment; for example, see *The Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment* (2014).

54 See, for example, the work undertaken by The Bartlett School of Planning at University College London: <http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/planning/five-radical-ideas/ideas/4>.

ResPublica Green Papers

ResPublica Green Papers are pithy yet powerful publications which communicate a single idea or thesis in public policy, supported by a highly persuasive argument. The purpose of these short, provocative pieces is to spark a debate and generate public-wide interest in our punchy recommendations. We hope that this publication will do just this.

Society Programme

The UK has one of the most centralised states in the developed world and one of the more disaffected and politically estranged populations in Europe. We hold our leaders in contempt, but despair of doing anything for ourselves or for our community. This dysfunction at every level of society stems from the collapse of our social relations and personal foundations.

We are becoming an increasingly fragmented and atomised society, and this has deep and damaging consequences for our families, our communities and our polity.

At the most basic level, the break-up of families damages everyone, but hurts the very poorest first and worst. Too many children at the bottom of our society are at a significant disadvantage, as too much is borne by lone parents who are trying to do more and more with less and less. We know that the poorer you are, the less connected with your wider society you tend to be and the more removed from the traditional resources of community and kin. Bereft of the institutions and structures that could help them, and cut-adrift from traditions and cultures that once taught skills of survival and self-advancement, too many families and communities on low household incomes are deeply unstable and are facing seemingly insurmountable problems alone, unadvised and unassisted.

We believe that power should be devolved to the lowest appropriate level. Public services and neighbourhoods should be governed and shaped from the 'bottom up', by families and communities and their associations. Neighbourhoods need to be served by a range of providers that incorporate and empower their inhabitants. Moving away from a top-down siloed approach to service delivery, which results in departmental conflicts and different goals being pursued, such activity should be driven by a holistic and integrated vision of overall local need, which is thereby able to ascertain and address the most challenging factors that prevent human flourishing. We believe that neither state bureaucracy nor privatisation of public services can achieve an integrated approach that is attentive both to whole persons and the life of communities considered in the round. Instead, we need new institutions that reflect the priority of direct and inter-personal human relationships. Not only is such a method more humane, it is also likely to be the only approach that works.

This paper argues for a community right to beauty – a new community right that will give people more powers and incentives to shape, enhance and create beautiful places. In recent years, 'beauty' has been considered an addendum to public policy; a luxury that sits on the outskirts of social justice and discernment of the common good. But this is to misunderstand its true meaning. Beautiful places exist everywhere – in the urban, the rural, and all that sits in between – and are vital to the social and economic prosperity of a locality.

We call for a democratisation of beauty – of its language, use, accessibility and creation – and for communities to be placed at the heart of its discernment and realisation. The cost of ugliness, particularly for those who are the least wealthy in society, is far too high. We argue for a genuine place-based planning policy; for a co-creation of beautiful places between neighbourhoods and local actors; and for the introduction of a local policy infrastructure that will truly enable community-led decision-making to take place.



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