Beauty and Design for Human Dignity

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There cannot be a minimum standard for human existence that is not rooted in dignity. In fact, the normative and legal use of dignity implies its innateness. Statements like ‘[the] respect for the inherent dignity of those living in poverty must inform all public policies’ (UN 2012, 6) and ‘the concern for human dignity...postulates that people have inalienable rights to [certain] freedoms’ (OHCHR 2004, 9) seem self-evident. Despite its supposed innateness, human dignity is not universal. Millions of people, especially those living in poverty, endure conditions that violate their dignity (Hulme 2015; Chase and Walker 2012). Lack of stable shelter is particularly antagonistic to human dignity. The number of people living in substandard housing is staggering: an estimated 873 million people live in slums and refugee camps due to poverty, war, and environmental disasters (UN 2013; Zetter 2011). This contradicts our normative assumptions; it appears that dignity is not inalienable.

To meet this need for shelter, governments and organizations contribute emergency housing and subsidies. In 2014 alone, the UNHCR provided 39,907 tents for displaced people (UNHCR 2014). With limited resources, organizations must balance outreach and quality. During this process, many housing aid organizations express their guiding principles in terms of dignity. The UNHCR, for example, aims to ensure refugee ‘access to secure settlements where they can live in dignity’ and shelter solutions ‘that provide privacy, security, protection from the elements…and a space to live and store belongings in a dignified manner’ (UNHCR 2013, 7, 22). Similarly, Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to ‘ensure access for all to adequate, safe, and affordable housing and basic services’ (UN 2015, 14). The vagueness of the terms used in these principles is problematic, as it is not immediately clear what ‘dignified’ and ‘adequate’ shelter entails. Because acute need precludes beneficiaries from rejecting aid, donor organizations effectively define what constitutes adequate and dignified housing in the process of providing it. Vagueness does more than make implementing these objectives difficult; it allows organizations to deflect accountability, establish insufficient minimums, and adjust interpretations of dignity to make their efforts appear more successful.

If an organization claims to provide dignifying shelter, we imagine safe, healthy, and culturally appropriate housing that one would reasonably choose to live in (UN 2015, 23-30). More simply, if asked to imagine a dignified home, we could imagine a beautiful home. In fact, beauty in architecture is contingent on dignity. Before a structure can be considered architecture (and, consequently, before architecture can be considered beautiful) it must fulfill its functional role as shelter. According to Hegel, the ‘hut and the house of god presuppose inhabitants, men, images of the gods, etc. and have been constructed for them. Thus in the first place a need is there, a need lying indeed outside art’ (Knox 1973, n.p.). The three foundational ideals of the ancient Roman architect, Vitruvius, are also centered on the pragmatic function of architecture: firmness, or lasting existence; commodity, or fitness for purpose; and delight, or the artist’s innovation (Fields 2000, 129–30). As such, both the beauty and dignity of a building emerge from the innovative fulfillment of people’s needs through architectural form; we can imagine dignified and beautiful architecture as one in the same.
Most international aid organizations assess their outputs according to their fulfillment of quantifiable, key criteria. These evaluations tend to focus on functionality, efficiency, and ‘appropriateness’ of form (Harris and Arku 2007; UNHCR 2013; Monteith 2010). The UNHCR, for example, lists eleven dimensions that housing must provide, including protection, equity, accessibility, reliability, and environmental mitigation (UNHCR 2013). In emergency situations with constrained budgets, emphasis is placed on meeting basic needs rather than appealing to the aesthetic preferences of beneficiaries. In this strictly functional assessment, dignity is assumed to be provided indirectly by meeting critical shelter needs. This is not necessarily true. For example, while the UNHCR aims to provide dignity through tent shelters, living in a tent in Geneva was intuitively understood to be below the dignity of an UN intern (Rogers 2015: n.p.). This suggests that dignity requires more than the fulfillment of essential needs.

The pursuit of beautiful architecture may bridge the gap between meeting basic needs and promoting dignity. However, the pursuit of beauty is often viewed as superfluous and hedonic (Diefenbach and Hassenzahl 2009), especially in the context of international aid. The omission of beauty from the project objectives of organizations providing ‘dignified’ housing suggests that beauty is not essential for human dignity. This paper will challenge that assumption. Evaluating housing aid based on standards of architectural beauty could, in fact, promote dignity.

The prevalent use of dignity as a metric despite its varied, almost contradictory, meanings throughout history necessitates analysis in order to establish a working definition. Next, exploring the ambiguous use of beauty will reveal a tendency to conflate it with concepts of taste and power. This distorted concept of beauty underlies its omission from housing standards, as its pursuit may unintentionally promote social stratification, wasteful consumption, and indignity. As an alternative, beauty will be reframed as irreducibly subjective. Specifically, the exertion of self in the process of finding and producing beauty in the built environment will be presented as a means for achieving dignity. The paper will not conclude with a policy recommendation, but, rather, with a plea for a philosophical reorientation: that there cannot be a minimum standard for human existence that is not rooted in dignity; that society does not abandon the poor and powerless to a life without beauty.

Dignity

In current international development literature, it is presumed that advocating for dignity is worthwhile (Bagaric and Allan 2006). Knowing what promotes dignity, however, depends on when and how dignity is assessed and requires a working definition. Unfortunately, dignity is rarely defined in poverty literature. Most often, dignity is used as a ‘normative vanishing point where debate has to end’, likely because the ‘appeal to dignity simply feels or appears decisive and definitive’ (Riley 2010, 120). Take, for example, the use of dignity in the UN’s working documents for the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals:

We recognize that the dignity of the human person is fundamental...We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice and equality; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural values; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential while promoting shared prosperity. (UN 2015, 2)

By 2020 ensure a minimum living wage sufficient to support a family to live with dignity, particularly workers in the informal sector, women workers, domestic workers, and migrant workers. (UN 2015, 23)
[Outcome documents reiterate] the commitment…to remove the obstacles to the full realization of the right of self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation, which…are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person... (UN 2015, 30)

The use of dignity likely refers to ‘self-determination’ or the ‘full realization of human potential’, but it is still unclear whether these goals are related to economic, social, or environmental development, or to all of the above. A brief examination of the historical use of the word reveals why this distinction is difficult to ascertain.

In its early use, dignity signified nobility, status, and worth (Kolnai 1976, 251). In Latin, the term ‘dignitas denotes both the status of an individual (a ‘dignitary’) and the bearing associated with that status’ (Riley 2010, 118). What makes one worthy of status, however, has undergone transformation. The Revolutionary era and the Enlightenment brought about two important connotative changes, namely i) that it was understood as a universal rather than behavioral or aristocratic and ii) that its use shifted from indicating status to justifying political equality between persons (Riley 2010, 133). In particular, Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals paved the way for secular and universal conceptions of dignity by legitimizing its existence through morality instead of divinity.

This moral dimension of dignity was central to the post-WWII deliberations on international law (Bagaric and Allan 2006). Dignity became a ‘foundational norm’ within the UN, and signified moral consensus and ‘commitment to the value of the individual over…the interests of the state’ (Riley 2010, 119). Including dignity in international legal instruments marked a functional break from ‘dignity-within-aristocracy’ to ‘dignity-within-democracy’ (Riley 2010, 118). This new paradigm emphasized individual rights and began the period which Bagaric and Allan call the ‘proliferation of rights talk’ (2006, 257). Dignity appears in a wide range of rights documents drafted after 1945, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights (Bagaric and Allan 2006). In 1976, the California Natural Death Act introduced dignity into the context of healthcare in cases of terminal illness. The ‘right to die’ aimed to restore patient autonomy to choose whether or not they receive life-sustaining care in the face of imminent death (Macklin 2003). As a result, the concept of dignity acquired an association with autonomy and the right to self-determination.

This history reveals three distinct modes of dignity. The first is the post-WWII use, which is centered on a concept which Kolnai (1976) calls Human Dignity. Human Dignity refers to dignity as an inherent quality. It is reminiscent of, if not conflated with, the inherent ‘Rights of Man’ in that it is considered inalienable and is granted through social contracts (1976, 258; see also Donnelly 1982). Kolnai notes, however, ‘whereas the ‘Rights of Man’ can only be disregarded, negated, insulted, violated or ‘suppressed’, ‘Human Dignity’ can actually be impaired and destroyed…’Human Dignity’ is threatened mainly by the impact on us of powers alien to our own will’ (1976, 259-60). Appeals to Human Dignity establish the minimum standards of treatment owed to all persons in order to prevent the impairment and destruction of dignity.

The second mode is Dignity as Autonomy, or the ability for self-actualization and self-determination. Dignity as Autonomy is distinct from Human dignity in its emphasis on the agency of the dignified. According to Kant, one of the primary issues with treating people solely as means, or as if they have a price, is that they become objects and are precluded from meaningful decision making (1804, 46). In his view, ‘autonomy is…the ground of the dignity of the human and of every rational creature’ (1804, 54). Similarly, Maslow’s (1954) ‘higher-needs’--self-respect, self-actualization, and self-transcendence-- are attained through the exertion of oneself in pursuit of full human potential. It is important to note that autonomy does not necessarily lead to dignity; people make choices which destroy their
dignity and the dignity of others. Autonomy is, however, a necessary precondition for achieving the higher stages of psychological development. In this context, autonomy can be understood as dignifying because it makes possible the acquisition of traits which society deems admirable.

The last mode is Dignity as a Quality, or the possession of social grace, self-discipline, and earned respect (Kolnai 1976). Of the three uses of dignity examined in this paper, Dignity as a Quality is the most subjective and the most reminiscent of its aristocratic origins. Kolnai describes the elusive yet recognizable Dignity as a Quality:

Dignity also tends to connote the features of self-contained serenity, of a certain inward and toned-down but yet translucent and perceptible power of self-assertion...patient rather than anxiously defensive, and devoid but not incapable of aggressiveness. (1976, 254)

Dignity as a Quality is not merely the possession of autonomy, but of a specific type of autonomy which confidently navigates ‘the tension between Value and Reality...between what things ought to be, should be...or are desired to be and what things are, can be and are allowed to be’ (1976, 262). To act with dignity is to act in accordance with the values of a group. To be seen as dignified earns respect and status.

The SDGs make use of each of these modes of dignity. By referencing ‘self-determination’ and ‘the full realization of human potential’ while calling for the preservation of dignity, the authors refer to Dignity as Autonomy and Dignity as a Quality. In the same document, the authors suggest that the ability to work for a ‘minimum living wage’ provides the means to support a family in dignity. In this context, they are more likely referring to Human Dignity rather than ‘the full realization of human potential’. The ambiguity of the term, however, makes for an interesting rhetorical device. Because dignity connotes a base level of treatment that is inherently deserved by all persons, it functions well as the ‘normative vanishing point’ in policy documents (Riley 2010, 120). At the same time, references to dignity evoke the higher levels of human potential carried in dignity as autonomy and as a quality. This ambiguity can be both positive and negative; it can make policy objectives seem loftier and more generous than an institution is actually committed to providing, or it can provide a legal fulcrum to advocate for improved protections and provisions for those in need. In either case, the use of dignity in reference to the living conditions by international development organizations warrants a close inspection of the intersection between dignity and housing.

As it turns out, housing plays direct and indirect roles in each mode of dignity. In Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs, shelter is considered a foundational need which precedes higher levels of psychological development. Likewise, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights grants that everyone is entitled to adequate housing (UN 1954, sec. 25), and shelter is one of the UNHCR’s top priorities in humanitarian responses (UNHCR 2015a). Having adequate shelter is a precondition for both Human Dignity and Dignity as Autonomy. Additionally, the beautification and maintenance of a material home can serve to restore a person’s autonomy (Neumark 2013). The architecture of emergency housing can be a site for the re-exertion of control in order to regain a sense of ‘order...and normality’ (2013, 249). Finally, in the context of Dignity as a Quality, architecture is both a means for expressing and judging the dignity of its occupant. A pristine home, for example, suggests the possession of the self-discipline, means, and time to maintain a house—in other words, that the owner possesses Dignity as a Quality. ‘Dignified’ architecture is architecture that we envision those with power and respect living in. Perhaps more importantly, dignified architecture is the architecture we might strive to live in ourselves.
Beauty and Dignity

Beauty, like dignity, has an ambiguous meaning that requires a historical examination. Early studies of beauty, or aesthetics, aimed to establish which observable properties determine beauty. Investigations of form, proportion, color, and other qualities informed concepts of beauty embedded in the qualities of an object or a moment independent of social factors. Plato especially emphasized the separation of social values from beauty; he considered beauty to be exclusively conveyed through forms that ‘remind souls of their mystery’ without relying on prior knowledge of concepts like justice or morality (Pappas 2015).

Architects and critics utilize objective notions of beauty to analyze architecture. When considered objectively, beauty in design is attributed to the physical form and composition of buildings. The golden ratio, famously associated with classical architecture, is often sketched over drawings of buildings to demonstrate the presence of natural and pleasing proportions. Villa Rotonda by Palladio, for example, is revered because of its proportion, balance, and ornamentation (García-Salgado 2008). Embedded within this objective analysis of beauty, however, is the implication that the beauty of the design exists independently of subjective interpretation. If the forms and proportions are in themselves beautiful, then the question ‘do you find this building beautiful?’ is no longer relevant. Instead, the question becomes ‘do you have the ability to discern the beauty of this building?’ Thus, the ability to identify beauty is a skill instead of a preference. This skill, or ‘taste’, becomes a marker of one’s level of aesthetic education.

The notion of taste adds a social dimension to the experience of beauty; investigations of taste are more concerned with the phenomenon of normative agreements on beauty. Kant holds that ‘judgments of beauty’ are implicitly made as universal claims, even if significant disagreements exist (Kant 5: 214; 58). While claims of beauty are subjective, they are subsequently assessed in relation to normative views and are evaluated according to their conformity to the common voice (Allison 2001: 108). Thus, claims of beauty that are not in accordance with the common voice are ‘erroneous judgments of taste’ (2001: 107).

Modern social science theorists, however, understand normative views to be at least influenced, if not determined, by socioeconomic and cultural forces. In his work, Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, Bourdieu claims that ‘the eye is a product of history reproduced by education’ (1984, 3). The ability to speak about art abstractly is only possible with the necessary social and financial capital to invest in education. People who cultivate taste seek to ‘repress the clear relation between taste and education’ in order to maintain their legitimacy (1984, 11). To demonstrate this, Bourdieu conducted a study in which a photograph of an old woman’s hands was shown to working class people and to members of the social elite. The working class people in his study tended to ‘express conventional emotional or an ethical complicity but never a specifically aesthetic judgement’ when describing the photograph, using phrases like ‘the old girl must have worked hard’ (1984, 44). In contrast, members of the social elite made abstract references to art and larger societal problems, with one participant describing the hands as ‘the very symbol of toil...[reminiscent] of Flaubert’s old servant woman’ (1984, 45). The differing tendencies between classes led Bourdieu to claim that ‘social subjects...distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make between the beautiful and the ugly’ (1984, 6). Bourdieu suggests a disturbing but compelling thesis: taste actively maintains social distinctions between the powerful and the powerless.

The distinction of taste is readily apparent in architecture. An example is the work of Brad Pitt’s Make It Right foundation, which hired famous architects to design 21 housing options for a 150 house project after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, (MakeItRight.org 2015). During the design process, many of the working-class residents complained that the
flat roofs favored by many of the modern designers looked like emergency relief trailers (Curtis 2009). Architectural critics critiqued the houses for being too expensive (DePillis 2013) and modern, claiming they would ‘never blend into what was an old and historical neighborhood’ (Monteith 2010; DePillis 2013; Curtis 2009). Ironically these designs appealed to architecture connoisseurs who chartered private tours of the recovering neighborhood. The tourists were uninterested or unwilling to engage with the community, prompting residents to post signs shaming their disingenuous presence (Weyer 2012).

In addition to the possession of taste, the consumption of beauty can also reinforce social stratification. In his major work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen (1899) calls the public consumption of goods aimed at demonstrating status ‘conspicuous consumption’. This concept is founded on Veblen’s belief that exemption from ‘necessary everyday employments into which no element of exploit enters’ indicates wealth and power (1899, 11). Consequently, the ‘unproductive consumption of goods [became] honorable, primarily as a mark of prowess’ (1899, 50). If one cannot afford to consume wastefully, many practice what Veblen calls ‘pecuniary emulation’. This is the act of portraying wealth by mimicking behaviors and purchasing items which supposedly demonstrate status.

The ‘staged-cities’ of the mega sporting events are an example of pecuniary emulation. Large-scale evictions and demolitions of informal settlements in South Korea prior to the 1988 Summer Olympics were carried out in ‘beautification’ initiatives aimed at ‘improving the appearance of high-profile areas’ (Greene 2003, 163). Similarly, the violent destruction of slums in South Africa before the 2010 World Cup drew sharp criticism from the international community (McDougall 2010; Werth 2010). The attempt to portray wealth to international visitors by demolishing slums and replacing them with mid-rise developments is pecuniary emulation on a national scale.

This is not to suggest that these practices result in beauty; the ‘beautification’ displaced thousands of people in a vulgar attempt to emulate wealth. As Gronow explains, ‘vulgar taste is born when consumption and consumer goods become more and more important status symbols and yet anyone can buy them...[this] creates the powerful impression of superficiality and tastelessness’ (1998, 41). Pecuniary emulation is likely what leads people to reject the notion that the pursuit of beauty can lead to dignity. In the situations of scarcity associated with international development, spending on luxurious materials or elegant products that do not maximize functionality is not tolerated, and can even be perceived as vulgar taste. In an effort to avoid pecuniary emulation, functionality is prioritized in housing aid, even at the expense of beauty.

Because beautiful housing is difficult for people living in poverty to obtain, it is important to understand the aesthetic domain the powerless often experience: ugliness. At first, one might assume that ugliness is the absence of beauty; Beech (2011) rejects this notion, explaining that ‘[ugliness] is not the negative of beauty, or the absence of beauty, but the experience of something being in the wrong place and of not having a right place to be’ (2011: 6). Beech illustrates his point with the concept of a stain: the stain is not the absence of something; it exists and independently and yet does not belong anywhere. If ugliness is associated with badness and unbelonging, then the poor do not merely live in undesirable housing; the poor live in housing which does not belong anywhere.

On a more practical level, the link between ugly design and health risk is more direct than one might assume. In housing, ugly architecture may very well serve as a warning of danger. Poorly crafted construction means that doors, windows, and sheathing are less likely to insulate the house; poor insulation in low-income housing is directly related to poorer health of occupants (Gibson et al. 2011). Mold, exposed insulation, peeling paint, dust, and cheap materials are ugly; the presence of mold and dampness, airborne particulates, and chemicals released from cheap materials are again associated with higher rates of illness
Overcrowding and lack of adequate space can make an interior space uncomfortable and unattractive, or an urban space, such as a slum, seem dangerous and poorly planned; overcrowding is also strongly correlated with higher rates of mental and physical health issues (Habib et al. 2009). The impacts can even result from subjective interpretations of a house’s beauty or dignity: Wells and Harris found that poor quality housing ‘may lead occupants to socially withdraw because they are embarrassed by their living conditions or feel that their home is too small, poorly maintained, or otherwise inadequate for entertaining…[which possibly leads to] psychological distress’ (2007, 75). In these assessments, the design indicators associated with negative outcomes can often be understood as ‘ugly’.

This shame and the resulting social isolation mentioned earlier (Wells and Harris 2007) shows that people stigmatize themselves based off of their housing. Evans et al. also found that ‘symbolically, both structural quality and maintenance of the home…are often primary factors in how others view the residents…Prospective employers, the police, and school authorities may react negatively…to the stigma attached to living in [bad housing]’ (2003, 492). In other words, evidence suggests that ugly housing is used to evaluate one’s own as well as others’ Dignity as a Quality. The ‘ugliness’ of social housing and poor neighborhoods might also be exaggerated by policy decisions which condense poverty through economic segregation (Fry and Taylor 2012; Jargowsky 1996; Watson 2006) and by the austere high-density housing typologies used to reduce costs and spatial needs (Evans, Wells, and Moch 2003; Florida 2014). Self-sorting and stigmatization also occur with ‘beautiful’ design: when locals first saw the intricate stonework construction of their regional hospital designed by MASS Design Group, they thought it was a hotel for tourists (MASS Design Group 2015). Similarly, the arguably ‘beautiful’ designs from Pitt’s Make It Right campaign were said to not ‘belong’ in the notoriously poor 9th Ward of New Orleans (Monteith 2010), but it is unlikely the same remark would have been made if they were located in a wealthy suburb. If beauty is the identifier and the possession of the dignified, ugliness is both the mark and the fruit of indignity.

Subjective Beauty and Dignity

Intuitively, however, we know that all people, including those enduring poverty, have moments of beauty in their lives. There is beauty that is not dependent on wealth or material objects; beauty can be an experience generated by any range of conditions, from visiting a modest but memory-filled childhood home to observing a spontaneous act of kindness. This ‘subjective’ beauty is universal in the sense that the sentiment is known to all, but specific to each subject. Kirwan explains this concept:

[I]f I can even imagine one person saying on one occasion ‘This is beautiful’ and, even if I am not of that person’s opinion, I nevertheless know what the person means…[beauty is] the feeling itself. (1999, 4-5)

Subjectivity not only offers a new foundation for an analysis of beauty, but also for the analysis of dignity and morality. Nietzsche’s philosophy provides us with a framework to undertake this reexamination.

Nietzsche’s (2007) On the Genealogy of Morality argues that ‘good’ was originally associated with the ‘spiritually noble’, ‘aristocratic’, and ‘spiritually privileged’ and that ‘bad’ means ‘common’, ‘plebeian’, and ‘low’ (2007, 13). This distinction resulted in two perspectives of morality: the perspective of the master, or the noble and the powerful, and the perspective of the slave, or the powerless and the common. In contrast to Kant, but similar to Bourdieu’s Distinction, Nietzsche asserts that hierarchies of power, rather than a philosophical notion of what is just and right, provide the foundation for our notions of morality.
Within this conception of morality, Nietzsche viewed dignity as a manipulative social construct. While Veblen claims that work is symbolically degrading to social status, Nietzsche equates labor to slavery. This is not to say that it is avoidable or undignifying per se, but rather that labelling it as ‘dignifying’ is a ‘transparent lie’ (2007, 165). In his own words:

[W]e speak of the ‘dignity of man’ and of the ‘dignity of work’. We struggle wretchedly to perpetuate a wretched life; this terrible predicament necessitates exhausting work which man – or, more correctly – human intellect, seduced by the ‘will’, now and again admires as something dignified. But to justify the claim of work to be honoured, existence itself, to which work is simply a painful means, would, above all, have to have somewhat more dignity and value placed on it than appears to have been the case with serious-minded philosophies and religions up till now. (2007, 164)

This rather extreme view portrays dignity—at least in its normative use—as an idea which obscures the true nature of the relationship between work and existence. Work, or the means to existence, is not dignifying because ‘existence itself’ is not dignifying. Dignity, he claims, ‘is actually the point where the individual completely transcends himself and no longer has to work….in the service of the continuation of his individual life’ (Diethe 2007, 165). In other words, true dignity can only be achieved through self-actualization. This has damning implications in the context of international development, where debates allude to higher modes of dignity but only become manifest in policies centered on Human Dignity, or the minimum standard of treatment needed for people to sustain their existence (see Hulme 2015).

Upon closer inspection, we find that Human Dignity can, in fact, be dehumanizing. For example, absolute poverty lines, especially those that determine poverty using the minimal caloric intake required to sustain life (WB 2015), reduce human existence to the mechanical sustainment of bodies. Recently, the Manchester City Council banned all homeless people from sleeping in a tent on Manchester City land in an attempt to disperse homelessness protesters that camped in front of the city hall. The city effectively ruled that tents are above the permissible level of dignity for someone experiencing homelessness. The solicitor representing the protesters advised ‘all the homeless in Manchester...[to sleep in] sleeping bags or blankets, cardboard boxes, park benches, doorways, bus shelters or any accommodation offered by charities or they would face up to two years imprisonment’ (Greaves 2015). These examples are not meant to detract from the positive impact that the concept of Human Dignity can have—arguments founded on Human Dignity have ended many human rights abuses. The examples do, however, reveal the inherent risk of utilizing a limited concept of dignity that assumes existence itself is inherently dignified.

Nietzsche’s argument is aligned with Ruskin’s (1886) belief that agency is not only a necessary element for beauty and dignity in design, but the purpose of design; in the wake of division of labor during the industrial revolution, he warned that ‘the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art’ (1886, 31). Instead of demanding perfection by requiring builders to replicate prescribed designs, encouraging free will, or ‘savageness’, results in subtle imperfections that contribute to perfection of a higher-order by elevating man from an animated tool to an autonomous thinking being. In essence, treating the producers of architecture as ends instead of means dignifies both the builder and the building.
Two Examples and a Philosophical Reorientation

The potential for architecture to be a vehicle for dignity and for subjective beauty is illustrated by Elemental’s housing project for people displaced by the 2010 earthquake and tsunami in Chile. In response to limited government subsidies, the architects used funds to finish ‘half’ houses (in reality complete, but small homes) and leave half as exposed structure. This allowed residents to occupy the finished portion and improve the second half as funds become available (Elemental 2015). The uniformity of the repetitive design was enriched as residents expressed their individuality and regained agency through architectural and beautification projects, as described by Neumark (2013). This not only provides Dignity as Autonomy; the design invites residents to engage in a subjective experience of beauty as they expand and embellish their homes according to their preferences.

In contrast, the iconic tent shelters deployed by the UNHCR demonstrate a failure to facilitate dignity or beauty through design. The tents are clearly designed for rapid deployment and flexibility, and they meet these functional goals well. But, outside of being referred to as ‘some kind of roof’ on the website, the tents are exercises in value-engineering rather than dignifying architectural design. They provided the minimum shelter required for Human Dignity, but do not facilitate the dignity of self-actualization or autonomy alluded to in UNHCR guiding principles. Even the envelope of the structure—a literal canvas—is proudly described as ‘emblazoned’ with the UNHCR logo as ‘a recurring image of our [the UNHCR’s] role at the centre of many…humanitarian emergencies’ (UNHCR 2015a). If left blank, this canvas could be a medium for self-expression; painting and writing on the surface, as was done by Syrian refugees earlier this year, provides a conduit for beautification and exertion of control over one’s environment (UNHCR 2015b). The UNHCR recognized the ‘catharsis’ the art project provided, but it seems that three painted tents were removed and displayed in various donor countries to promote refugee awareness instead of contributing to the vibrancy, dignity, and beauty of the camp.

In a crisis, urgency and limited resources force housing aid organizations to make difficult decisions. During this process, appeals to dignity attempt to remind organizations and donors that each decision defines the experience of thousands of people. It does seem, however, that these organizations have narrowed their goals to providing the more achievable but inherently limited concept of Human Dignity. Furthermore, the fear of generating waste in the pursuit of distorted notions of pecuniary beauty has relegated subjective beauty to indirect or secondary goals. The aim of this paper is to encourage organizations like the UNHCR to not just seek out, but actively create moments for self-expression, dignity, and beauty in the experience of displacement. The philosophical reframing of beauty as subjective and dignity as self-actualization should underpin our approach to poverty reduction. Architecture does not need to be expensive to be beautiful; it must be carefully and empathetically designed. It must function as an artifice on which someone rebuilds their life. It must be the sanctuary where people’s hopes, fears, triumphs and tragedies unfold. If the world truly wants to provide dignity, it is important to reaffirm the role of beauty in human life:

Beauty is an option for art and not a necessary condition. But it is not an option for life. It is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it’ (Danto 2003: 160)
Works Cited


