

Leon Battista Alberti: *De re aedificatoria* (*On the Art of Building*, 1485)
Trans. Joseph Rykwert with Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1988.

Book VI, Chapter 2

Beauty is that reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken away, or altered, but for the worse.... Ornament may be defined as a form of auxiliary light and complement to beauty. From this it follows, I believe, that beauty is some inherent property, to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character of something attached or additional.

[Yet some] maintain that beauty ... is judged by relative and variable criteria, and that the forms of buildings should vary according to individual taste and must not be bound by any rules of art. A common fault, this, among the ignorant—to [reject] anything they do not understand.

Book IX, Chapter 5

When you make judgments on beauty, you do not follow mere fancy, but the workings of a reasoning faculty that is informed in the mind.... No one can look at anything shameful, deformed, or disgusting without immediate displeasure and aversion.... For within the form and figure of a building there resides some natural excellence and perfection that excites the mind and is immediately recognized by it.

... Beauty is a form of sympathy and consonance of the parts within a body, according to definite number, outline, and position, as dictated by the absolute and fundamental rule in Nature. This is the main object of the art of building, and the source of her dignity, charm, authority, and worth.

Book IX, Chapter 1

Everything is best when it is tempered to its own importance. And if you want my advice, I would rather the private houses of the wealthy were wanting in things that might contribute to their ornament, than have the more modest and thriftier accuse them of luxury in any way. ... We decorate our property as much to distinguish family and country as for any personal display (and who would deny this to be the responsibility of a good citizen?). ... It is preferable to make the parts that are particularly public ... such as the façade, vestibule, and so on, as handsome as possible....

...The temporal [temporary] ought to concede to the sacred in dignity as far as is reasonable, so in refinement and quantity of ornament, private buildings should allow themselves to be surpassed easily by public ones.

Not that precious materials should be completely renounced and banished; but they should be used sparingly in the most dignified places, like jewels in a crown. If I were to sum up the whole question, I would say that sacred buildings ought to be so designed that nothing further may be added to enhance their majesty or cause greater admiration for the beauty; the private building, on the other hand, must be so treated that it will not seem possible to remove anything, because everything has been put together with great dignity. To the others, that is, the profane public, must be left, I feel, a position midway between these two.