

The beauty of impermanence

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We are living in a time where **NEW!** defines the quality of a product. This applies to clothing, which by definition is in or out of fashion every season, but also for electronics and even buildings. Not **NEW!** just doesn't seem as good as **NEW!**

The lifespan of products is increasingly determined by taste and technical possibilities, and less by their quality. This development can also be seen in architecture. Thanks to the possibilities that software offers, architects are able to design spectacular buildings. And with the aid of that same software they can also be built. This way some buildings are showcases of the current technical possibilities. But they age as fast as technology progresses.

Whether it's telephones, cars, clothing or offices, only few will reach the end of their technical lifespan. This wastes a lot of raw materials and energy, but it also causes a self-reinforcing psychological effect: something which is not new is perceived as inferior.

And yet, we cherish our historical inner cities and exhibit our cultural heritage in museums. A 20-year-old car ends up in the scrap heap, whereas a 50-year-old car is treasured. As things are older there seems to be an increasing consensus on what is beautiful and valuable.

At the same time, we have difficulty accepting the process of aging. We fill, paint and polish until all looks shiny and new. Our body shouldn't age either. Wrinkles and other signs of aging are, along with the facial expression, carefully removed.

But aging is needed for patina on beautiful old materials. That's why tourists buy an authentic piece of France in "brocantes" to take home. It is the need for authenticity that is lacking in a society where everything can be made or bought, except for time. And only time gives an object patina.

The solution: factory-applied patinated green copper roofs and natural stone facades of office buildings. Natural stone is beautiful because it has been compressed in the earth for an infinite amount of time. It gives a building identity and authenticity, but it is only a shell. Like the "Potemkinsche Stadt" we are looking at a cardboard exterior that should hide the ugliness of the standardized concrete construction.

It is not what it seems, it is an effect, an experience. A broken façade panel should therefore immediately be replaced to keep the dream alive. City centers have become entertainment machines, managed by city marketing offices. And if the city is an amusement park, the rides must be perfect and display the desired image.

Just before he died, Johnny Cash recorded the song "Hurt" by Nine Inch Nails: 'I hurt myself today, to see if I still feel. I focus on the pain, the only thing that's real'.

Perhaps pain indeed is the only real thing in our disneyfied-entertainment-society. A poignant sublime feeling when something unexpectedly throws you off balance, or (even) when something bothers you. This has been a role of the arts since the Renaissance. To allow the spectator to see beyond the generally accepted and known.

Dutch writer Ferdinand Bordewijk wrote: 'That which is considered as beautiful, is bound by strict laws. It soon tends to become dreadfully boring. Ugliness doesn't follow any law.'

I wish to make a plea to accept that objects need time to become beautiful. To appreciate this period as part of its history and identity. The journey is often more interesting than the destination if you keep your eyes wide open.

I want to make a case for all things not **NEW!** For visible wear and tear and patina but against factory-applied patination. For accepting that not everything has to be conceived and carefully engineered. For changes by time, by chance and the uncontrollable. And above all for a different perception of aging.

Many buildings are listed to be renovated or demolished. They no longer meet demands or they are simply out of fashion. They need a new vision, a strategy, to make them economically viable while retaining their identity. To allow them to age and make their impermanence visible. To make us take a look over the fence of the amusement park, at the real world.

It asks for an intelligent intervention which respects its history and keeps it legible. While at the same time making it sufficiently functional and attractive for owners, users and passers-by. To design the maximum acceptable imperfection. A subtle, constantly changing balance between chaos and order, old and new.

This contrast enhances the image and shows us what would otherwise be lost: The beauty of impermanence.