

# Beauty and Socialism

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How the Left can put Beauty back into  
Britain

Ike Ijeh

Foreword by Jon Cruddas





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# Foreword

Solving the housing crisis is arguably the most pressing socio-economic challenge Britain and its new Labour Government faces. The Government has responded to this by placing the construction of more homes in Britain at the centre of its policy programme for this Parliament, pledging to build 1.5 million homes over the next five years.

But welcome as this commitment is, will it be enough? Britain has been here before, in the last years of the Wilson Government in the late 1960s and at the close of an astonishing post-war housebuilding programme, Britain built more homes than it has ever built before or since. Even more impressively, almost half of them were council houses. 416,366 new homes were built in 1968. Annual contemporary completions barely manage half that number. Why then, half a century later, are we stuck with another housing crisis?

There are many reasons but one of the most significant is that our last major national housebuilding programme paid too little attention to a vital commodity that essentially enables housing to become homes: beauty. Instead of using beauty to humanise mass-development and stitch housing into the fabric of its local community, history and identity, it was instead discarded in favour of an intransigent utilitarian orthodoxy that saw the mechanistic provision of as many housing units as possible as the sole responsibility of the state.

Many deprived, working-class, post-industrial neighbourhoods bore the brunt of this policy leaving the most economically vulnerable in society marginalised, isolated, disenfranchised and often terrorised by the very council estates conceived for their accommodation and protection. This created a backlash against further development which scars Britain to this day.

In its eagerness to build, especially for the poor, this utilitarian unilateralism is a societal reflex the left is especially vulnerable to – just as the right is prone to prioritising short-term profit and the interests of developers over the needs of communities. But it is a mistake we simply cannot afford to make again and in order to avoid repeating it beauty cannot be seen as a supplement to our housebuilding programme, it must be central to it.

Which is why this timely and urgent essay from Policy Exchange comes at such a critical juncture in our national narrative. If the new Government wishes its commitment to housebuilding to be taken seriously, it essentially faces a stark choice.

It can either build housing by resurrecting the utilitarian tradition that

has been the default socialist response to mass housing for much of the last half century and beyond. In so doing, it can also repeat the mistakes that some on the left made with their hostile reaction to the recent Building Beautiful programme and ignoring beauty's latent ability to connect architecture to the people it is meant to serve, regardless of style.

Or the Government could reach deeper into its socialist heritage to build beautiful housing and inclusive communities that meaningfully address the housing crisis. This would enable it to re-establish the older, foundational socialist tradition that viewed beauty as integral to bestowing human dignity on the poor and improving the lives and living conditions of the most vulnerable in society – on whose behalf the Labour party was originally established to advocate.

The Government could further reclaim, as this paper urges it to, the municipal socialism of the 1930s that so embellished the private and public buildings of so many of our towns and cities, including that of my old Dagenham constituency where the Becontree Estate, still Europe's largest council estate by population, was created. And it could boldly reassert the intellectual eloquence of celebrated 19th seers like John Ruskin and William Morris, social visionaries who saw beauty as the vital communal accelerant that harmonised and humanised the neighbourhoods in which the working poor lived by skilfully redefining houses as streets, individuals as communities and private growth as public good.

By outlining key messaging for all those involved in the development of our built environment, this inspiring Policy Exchange paper offers the Government a strategic blueprint for how beauty can help Labour use its socialist heritage to solve the housing crisis.

*Jon Cruddas, MP for Dagenham and Rainham, 2001-2024, and Co-Leader of Policy Exchange's 'Future of the Left' Project.*





## Introduction

It is clear from the first speech of the new Chancellor of the Exchequer that the new Labour government intends to build. But does it intend to build beautifully? And does it even matter if it doesn't? In her maiden policy statement, Rachel Reeves announced a tranche of measures intended to trigger economic growth and solve Britain's housing crisis. These included planning reform, infrastructure incentivisation, greenbelt development and the reintroduction of national housing targets.

But what kinds of homes will this new wave of construction bequeath to us and future generations? Within the broader, gruelling socio-economic context of a crippling housing crisis in which a critical lack of supply remains the most corrosive component, it may be tempting to prioritise quantity over quality and to marginalise beauty as an elective customisation rather than a political imperative.

This might appear to have been the approach taken by the new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government Angela Rayner when, in a media interview over the summer, she appeared to suggest that beauty means nothing as it is "too subjective".<sup>1</sup> This followed the announcement that the words 'beauty' and 'beautiful' were to be effectively stripped out of the National Planning Policy Framework and were no longer to be strategic planning requirements for new housing.<sup>2</sup>

Does this mean that right at the start of the new Labour government, beauty has been misconstrued as an impediment to rather than an enabler of meeting all-important housing targets? This would be a grave mistake, if so. Beauty not only underpins the shared civic inheritance of a built environment that should generally improve rather than worsen over time, but is also a founding principle of the early socialism on which the entire Labour movement was built.

In its understandable rush to build, the new Labour government is now faced with two crucial choices and which one it decides upon will affect not just our lives and futures but those of our families, communities, built environment and national wellbeing for potentially generations to come.

Does Labour continue the transactional, ultra-capitalist, corporatist, consumerist, profit-motivated and hyper-commercialist development approach that has pockmarked our cities with belligerent concrete and high-rise eyesores and invited a grim slurry of soulless, identikit housing developments to inch insidiously across our rural landscapes, spitefully

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1. <https://news.sky.com/story/beautiful-housing-rule-blocked-development-claims-angela-rayner-13188025>

2. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/07/29/labour-to-drop-beautiful-from-rules-on-housebuilding/>

submerging both town and country under a toxic gauze of ugliness whose corporatist allegiances are all too obvious in the regimentally regurgitative facades that bloom blankly across our nation like lobotomised three-dimensional spreadsheets?

Or does it instead reclaim and reestablish the proud tradition of beauty so fervently burned into early English socialism and by extension, the fledgling Labour movement, and so eloquently espoused by the likes of renowned 19th century theorists like John Ruskin and William Morris? A tradition that first and foremost viewed beauty not as a decorative bauble to delight the elite but as a fundamental facet of the improvement of private and public living conditions that socialism viewed as the solemn duty of the state and the inalienable democratic right of every citizen whether rich or poor?

This is a question first posed by Policy Exchange long before the days of the Labour government in 2018. 'Beauty for the Many, not for the Few' was a keynote seminar that invited leading figures on the left, such as Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Lisa Nandy MP and political theorist Maurice Glasman, to explore the socialist tradition of beauty and gauge what contribution it could make to contemporary political and philosophical discourse surrounding housing and development.

The seminar was part of Policy Exchange's landmark Building Beautiful programme, the instrumental policy initiative that over much of the last decade has helped both prompt and shape renewed public and political debate about the importance of beauty in our built environment. Also, in recommending the influential Building Better, Building Beautiful commission in 2018, chaired by the late philosopher Sir Roger Scruton, it subsequently left an indelible mark on government housing policy.

The seminar therefore acted as an intellectual precursor for what the Labour government must now do in office; construct a credible strategy for increasing housing supply that simultaneously revives beauty by channelling it through the ideological lens of the socialist principles Labour's political foregatherers once used to procure it.

Of course, the left has no more legitimate an ideological claim to beauty than the right and successive Labour and Tory governments have both been complicit in the sustained aesthetic degradation that now marks so much of our contemporary urban landscape, particularly with regard to the sterile urban wastelands all too often bequeathed by post-war rebuilding. While in 1962 Harold Macmillan himself probably took far too much pleasure than any conservative should have done when signing the demolition order for London's old Euston Arch and Station, neoclassical wonders of their age, his traditionalist disdain was reflected across the political spectrum and was more a result of modernist hegemony than conservative hypocrisy.

Nonetheless, what is undeniable is that as Thatcher and then Blair essentially cemented the centrist consensus that the capitalist model was the settled means for national economic growth, cultural and civic enrichment, certainly within our built environment at least, was perhaps

sacrificed for what Labour MP Jon Cruddas termed a “dash for units”<sup>3</sup> instead of a thirst for quality. As the late Sir Scruton himself observed of the last forty years:

“Our language, our music and our manners are increasingly raucous, self-centred, and offensive, as though beauty and good taste have no real place in our lives. One word is written large on all these ugly things, and that word is ‘me’.”<sup>4</sup>

These are ideal conditions for the socialist tradition of beauty to come to the fore and offer an alternative collective vision of what our homes, cities and built fabric could be and how beauty could be used to shape and improve them. While in the public consciousness socialism in an architectural context is probably still intrinsically associated with its mid-20th century brutalist permutations, most toxically evident in the negative visual epithets of ‘Soviet’ or ‘Stalinist’-style architecture, reference to socialism’s older aesthetic traditions could help overcome this.

Ruskin, arguably 19th century Britain’s most renowned writer-philosopher and within whose rapturous prose and poetry nestled some of the very earliest traces of what would later become English socialism, believed that beauty was central to human existence and framed his appreciation of it within a collectivist polemic that would be instantly recognisable to the left:

“No beauty is possible in a world where man would fain build to himself and build for the little revolution of his own life only.”<sup>5</sup>

Ruskin’s great contemporary William Morris, one of the leading exponents of the Arts & Crafts movement and one of the most celebrated figures in the long history of British textile design, eventually became an unrepentant fully-fledged socialist and demanded that the working poor be provided with “dwellings healthful, pleasant, and beautiful.”<sup>6</sup>

And although Ebenezer Howard was a political pragmatist at heart and was careful to temper any of the outright allusions to socialism that might have alarmed the corporate investors on which his visions relied; the seminal founder of the Garden City Movement that features so prominently in Labour’s election manifesto once announced that he considered Communism to be a “most excellent principle”.<sup>7</sup>

Now in government, the Labour party now has the priceless opportunity to extend the socialist legacy of beauty into the 21st century by seizing beauty’s enormous potential to reshape our urban environment in a spirit of egalitarian enrichment that will benefit society as whole. There are already signs that Labour understands this undertaking, Angela Rayner has spoken impassionedly about the importance of “exemplary design, with real character that fits in around the local area” and has wisely rejected the generic model of “identikit homes straight out of a catalogue.”<sup>8</sup> Sir Kier Starmer too has pledged to build rows of “Georgian-style townhouses”<sup>9</sup> in the new towns that form the centrepiece of the party’s housing policy.

But how will these ambitions be transferred into reality? Policy Exchange’s research offers multiple policy solutions, many of which, such as densification of brownfield land, (Better Brownfield, 2018), additional

3. Beauty for the Many, not the Few? Seminar, Policy Exchange, 2019

4. Scruton, Roger; Why Beauty Matters; (2009, BBC, Modern Beauty Season)

5. Ruskin, John; The Seven Lamps of Architecture, Chapter VI: The Lamp of Memory; (1849) Smith, Elder & Co

6. Morris, William, The Housing of the Poor; (1884) Justice

7. [https://spartacus-educational.com/Ebenezer\\_Howard.htm#:~:text=Howard%20admitted%20that%20he%20approved,communitistic%20parks%2C%20and%20communitistic%20libraries](https://spartacus-educational.com/Ebenezer_Howard.htm#:~:text=Howard%20admitted%20that%20he%20approved,communitistic%20parks%2C%20and%20communitistic%20libraries)

8. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/no-identikit-estates-in-labours-new-towns-promises-rayner-3cp2ftstp>

9. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/well-build-new-towns-and-georgian-style-homes-keir-starmer-to-pledge-gcx-dz622w>

funding to expand planning resources (The Property-Owning Democracy, 2023) and a strategic review of greenbelt land for potential development opportunities, (Homes for Growth, 2023) have been adopted by the Labour party. Equally, Policy Exchange's 2022 paper Re-engineering Regulation anticipated the improved regulatory framework in which more efficient planning and consequently improved built environment quality may flourish.

But in policy or legislative terms, beauty is an amorphous quality. An increase in defence spending will directly increase military capability and the recruitment of additional medical staff would be expected to improve healthcare outcomes. But beauty is emotional commodity rather than an economic one. It cannot, at least not in our modern world, be summoned by legislation or ordered by decree. It is culture that breeds beauty, not laws.

Therefore, for any government to realise beauty, it must first carefully cultivate the political, professional, planning and public ground from which it can spring. This can be done by the new government issuing a clear set of messages to the various actors who operate within the built environment explicitly articulating the tone, validity and expectations of a new signature beauty programme. In so doing, beauty could once again become a grassroots habit as well as a statutory imposition, a key asset to its sustainability and endurance.

Recent government commissions, such as the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission in 2018 and New Labour's Urban Taskforce in 1998, have had a transformative impact on the policy arena and national life, setting new agendas for both public and political housing and urban debates and helping shape the new policies that went on to turn the results of those debates into reality.

In its first 100 days, a new government might do well to consider the establishment of a similar new commission, perhaps under the banner of Growing Beautiful, to publicly re-set the government's relationship with housing and the built environment within an ideological framework that is fully conversant with the historic legacy beauty has played in assembling socialist doctrine.

There is no accumulation of quantity that makes the abnegation of quality acceptable. Beauty must go hand in hand with increasing supply if the housing crisis is to be resolved rather than recycled at a later date to inconvenience future generations.

Already we see understandable signs of impatience amongst some politicians and within the electorate who argue that the housing crisis is so acute that quality must, if necessary, be sacrificed for quantity and that we cannot afford to idealistically romanticise and prevaricate about beauty while millions struggle with the seemingly insurmountable challenge of trying to buy somewhere to live. New housing minister Matthew Pennycook has already found himself caught within the curtilage of this societal whiplash after being criticised for his hostility to a large, though aesthetically catastrophic, housing development in his Greenwich

constituency.<sup>10</sup>

While this argument is seductive, it is ultimately a false one and must be resisted at all costs. As history has taught us time and time again and particularly demonstrated with the failed council estates of the 1960s and 70, need gives no license to negligence and it would be an utter betrayal of those most in need if the new living conditions devised to meet that need eventually, through the erosion of quality and the subsequent evisceration of neighbourhoods, end up making those conditions worse.

Crucially, beauty offers the new government key tactical leverage when attempting to rebuff this argument, a rebuttal that is critical for maintaining support for beauty in the face of clear, powerfully emotive imperatives for a relentless focus on quantity instead. Because beauty is not simply about making things prettier, but it delves deep into a proud Labour heritage of seeking to improve living and working conditions for the poor while giving them unfettered access to the quality, refinement and resilience less progressive ideologies had historically reserved for the rich. This is the core intellectual principle that underpins the National Health Service, an institution that excites peerless devotional socialist reverence. So why not our national built environment too? As Ruskin understood all too well, houses alone will not solve the housing crisis, good housing will. To build anything is to solve nothing.

A Growing Beautiful commission could be the perfect vehicle to explicitly make this case to the public, politicians, planners, professionals and others. A series of keynote strategic messages specifically tailored to each stakeholder group could help make the government's position in these matters unequivocally clear and powerfully articulate beauty's intrinsic anatomical value not only to environmental enhancement but to economic growth and national renewal. These are objectives that are central to the missions the new government has identified as being key to rebuilding Britain.

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10. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/07/09/labour-relaxes-homes-planning-rules-housing-minister-nimby/>

# The Seven Strategic Messages on Beauty

1. To the Labour Party
2. To Architects
3. To the Public
4. To the Poorest
5. To Developers
6. To Places
7. To the World

## 1. To the Labour Party

It should be relatively easy for the government to construct a contemporary socialist argument for beauty based on its innate ability to address some of the key social injustices that have historically motivated the Labour movement. It is a fundamental function of socialist ideology to create better lives and living conditions for the working class and beauty can be a critical tool in achieving this.

Pioneering social reformer William Beveridge may not have been a socialist but his seminal 1942 report which effectively founded the National Health Service helpfully articulated what he saw as the “Five Giants” whose eradication he considered central to social progress: idleness, ignorance, want, disease and squalor.

While, to some degree, all these ailments have a physical dimension within the built environment, it is the last one whose noxious influence can be most evident within it. And historically, socialism responded to this challenge in two impressive ways which could and should inspire the current Labour party: what Glasman refers to as “municipal socialism” and perhaps most importantly, social housing.

In Britain the inter-war years and especially the 1930s arguably marked the aesthetic peak for both typologies. During this period, municipal socialism, essentially the design of public buildings and spaces, set new standards of modernist beauty that comprehensively renewed our civic fabric but did so in a way that was sympathetic to its traditionalist forbears and, as early socialism was able to accomplish far more successfully than its postwar variants, advanced the condition of the collective while enhancing rather than impoverishing the human experience and spirit of the individual.

During this time, the munificent, paternalistic arm of the state was able to craft extraordinary municipal projects like the stunning De La Warr Pavilion, Saltdean Lido, Blackpool Pleasure Beach, Hampstead Garden Suburb, the early housing and healthcare work of Berthold Lubetkin, and, in London, exemplar town halls like Hornsey, Greenwich, Stoke Newington, Dagenham, Hackney and Walthamstow.

In social housing too, the early council estates were conceived as super-sized mansions and terraces whose playful deployment of traditional residential features like arches, brickwork, terracotta, curves, cornices, courtyards and decoration enabled the municipal anonymity of mass housing to be broken down into human-sized fragments whose once-thriving neighbourhoods not only inserted themselves seamlessly into the existing urban fabric but engaged in an intuitive aesthetic dialogue with the past that brought comfort and familiarity to its residents.

This all built on the traditions of communal improvement and corporate benevolence enshrined into precedents like the Garden City Movement and Bournville in Birmingham, places where socialist ideology and traditional design were able to harmoniously coalesce around a utopian urban vision utterly committed to providing the best possible living conditions for those who in previous times might have been afflicted with the worst.

This was all a far cry from the Stalinist dystopia that many of the council estates built in the 1960s and 70s eventually became. And it is perhaps why today, as polling by Policy Exchange has consistently proven, working class communities remain by far the most supportive of traditional architectural styles with only 17% of socioeconomic groups DE thinking that new architecture should seek to challenge or shock its surroundings, a figure that rises to 31% amongst the AB socioeconomic group.

The success of both inter-war housing and public building all stemmed from a committed programme of municipal beautification that had socialist principles at its core. It should serve as a stunning example to the modern left of the beauty socialism is capable of delivering if it enshrines civic altruism, corporate benevolence, ideological collaboration and traditional design as its chief motivators.

But why then did socialism's architectural application change after the Second World War? The astonishing shift from effectively Bournville to Brutalism cannot just be explained by the seismic social, geopolitical and ideological recalibrations that followed 1945. There were two other influences that drove socialism's gigantic detour from the more tender trajectory set by Ruskin and Morris and it is important to understand the left's institutional vulnerability to them to ensure that any new programme of beautification does not stray similarly off course: they are elitism and the post-war architectural variation of modernist architecture itself.

Key to the success of any new Labour government's commitment to embed beauty back into our communities and built environment will be convincing the party's ministers, members and voters that beauty is not an elitist threat to the socialist position but an embedded historic part of it. It is perhaps understandable why the former assumption took hold



within the left; beauty is as old as civilisation itself but socialism has only been with us for barely a century. And for much of the time preceding that century, beauty was very much perceived as an exclusive vehicle for aristocratic pleasure.

Unsurprisingly, father of socialism Lenin perhaps most succinctly summed up its early attitudes to beauty when, after listening to Beethoven's *Appassionata*, he tetchily remarked that "I can't listen to music very often, it affects my nerves. I want to say sweet, silly things, and pat the little heads of people who, living in this filthy hell, can create such beauty."<sup>11</sup>

Beauty's abject refusal to submit to this "filthy hell" created immense problems for socialism's early relationship with it and few institutions embody the intractability of those problems - as well as the historical connection between beauty and the elitism socialism believed created that "hell" - as viscerally as royalty did.

Although even the gruff Duke of Wellington was forced to concede in the early 19th century that George IV's exquisite taste and prodigious assimilation of palaces, art and finery justly earned him the title of 'First Gentleman of Europe', the King's astonishing unpopularity tarnished both the monarchy and broader national appreciation of its cultural endeavours for decades to come.

While European monarchies tumbled throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, this pointedly did not happen in Britain where instead, the constitutional monarchy lost its political power but retained its pivotal role at the apex of an inflexible class pyramid that allowed the principles of privilege and subservience to reverberate powerfully through every corner of Britain's social fabric.

This had profound implications for both beauty and eventual socialist antipathy towards it and we see this exacted most ruthlessly in the devastating destruction of the English country house. Between 1900 and the 1970s, some 1,200 country houses were demolished in England along with almost 400 in Scotland, a trend that accelerated exponentially with the installation of the 1945 Labour government and which stands as England's biggest state sponsored cultural purge since the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century.

As all sides of the political spectrum would now acknowledge, this was all a colossal mistake. If we as a society are able to separate beauty from the delinquencies of its creators – nobody after all criticises Caravaggio's paintings because he was a murderer – then we, including the Labour movement, should also be able to separate works of the beauty from the repressive systems of patronage that might have procured them.

Failure to do so can plunge the left into a nihilistic vengeance spiral in which, in seeking to repudiate what is misconceived as beauty's heretical allegiance with elitism, it mandates what Cruddas calls "orthodox utilitarian models of design"<sup>12</sup> that inevitably summon the aforementioned "Stalinist" impoverishments and betray the rich Ruskin-esque tradition of socialist beauty that preceded them.

The result? Squadrons of soulless 1960s tower blocks and council estates

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11. Gorky, Maxim; V.I. Lenin; (1924); Lenin Museum

12. Beauty for the Many, not the Few? Seminar, Policy Exchange, 2019

across the nation ideologically resolute in their belief that their poor living conditions are a price worth paying for the prize of their unequivocal aesthetic deviation and subsequent moral absolution from their historic, unequal forbears. Instead of the utopian urban settlements early socialism and modernism had bestowed, public housing was plunged into a malicious maelstrom of antisocial behaviour, severed neighbourhoods, drug abuse, criminality and neglect, summoning once again the Five Giants Beveridge had worked so hard to slay.

Modernism had not only turned away from beauty, even worse it dismissed it as irrelevant. And the left, always more doctrinally acclimatised to modernism due to the founding socialist instincts they both shared, swiftly followed suit. This cannot be a mistake the left makes again. And the key to ensuring it is avoided is remembering that the socialist tradition of beauty considers it as much the social inheritance of the poor as it is a cultural commodity of the rich.

Assuming beauty is an elitist enterprise also relies on a fundamental misreading of its role in English history. Beauty in its many forms was convened for the pleasure of the masses as well as the elites. When Shakespeare wrote his plays and sonnets, it was ordinary working people who crammed into the playhouses to be entertained by them. London's first regular performances of Handel's Messiah in 1750 were sung by blind orphans in the care of the hospital the concerts helped fundraise for. And when in 1809 the predecessor to the Royal Opera House raised its prices, it was London's outraged proletariat who spent the next three months engaged in relentless rioting over the increase, killing 20 in the process.

It is only in our own age that society has become preoccupied with the idea that high art and beauty are a bourgeois inheritance, for most of their history, they have been an egalitarian one. Conscious of this pedigree, a new Labour government intent on bringing beauty back into our national life must reclaim it from its elitist misappropriation and recognise beauty's centrality to the pursuit of collective enrichment that underpins socialist ideology.

## 2. To Architects

When submitting the planning application for London's Centre Point tower in 1962, architect Richard Seifert coolly informed Camden council that "we shall be glad to discuss any amendments but it is important that the bulk of the building should not be reduced". It is unthinkable that any architect, even the most famous ones, would wield anything even approaching this level of power today.

Nevertheless, as the designers of our urban environment and those directly responsible for transforming abstract concepts like beauty (and ugliness) into reality, their support for any government programme that seeks to revive beauty is essential.

However, recent history proves that that support may not be as readily

available as the public might like. Within days of an Angela Rayner housing speech in June committing a future Labour government to providing “attractive” housing and accompanied by visualisations of Edwardian terraces and tree-lined boulevards, the architectural establishment amassed to thunder that the Labour party must not “fall for” housing designs based on “historic” styles.

In an open letter penned by some of the leading luminaries of the profession, including ex-RIBA president Ben Derbyshire and ex-government architecture chief Andy von Bradsky, architects insisted that:

“There is no need for the Labour Party to fall for the idea that the future of housing must be sold to the public as a return to traditional, historic ideas... The next generation of homes for heroes should be promoted with real design quality in mind, not historical, aesthetic populism.”<sup>13</sup>

Sadly, the implicit contradiction the letter perpetuates between design quality and historical styles is an ingrained architectural prejudice that nourishes the gaping disconnect that still exists between a public that is generally enthusiastic about traditional styles and an architectural elite that remains acutely hostile towards them.

The vitriol that met the government’s establishment of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission in 2018 serves as a caustic reminder of architectural aesthetic bias and the curious connection some in and around the profession draw between traditionalism and right-wing extremism.

“It’s plastic jingoism, hollow nostalgia and pathetic Empire 2.0 rhetoric” wailed professor of architecture at University of Illinois at Chicago Sam Jacobs, “pseudo-olden times cloaks a dark form of nationalism”.<sup>14</sup> Subsequent commentary proved no more sensible and, imbued with the subsequent importation of toxic American-style culture war identitarianism, scaled fresh heights of ideological lunacy.

“Classical architecture has become a weapon for the far-right” lamented the Guardian’s Hettie O’Brien, and is part of a “culture war to redefine who is ‘authentically’ European.”<sup>15</sup> Journalist India Block bemoaned that “neoclassical architecture harks back to a time when European nations were more powerful and homogenous and derived part of their power from the subservience of racial minorities and women”.<sup>16</sup> And writer Robert Bevan, architecture critic for the London Evening Standard, denounced traditionalism as this “ugly pursuit of beauty”.<sup>17</sup>

All this frenzied opprobrium marks a grave tactical misstep by both the left and the architecture profession and the new government must be sure to neither repeat nor endorse it. Architecture is first and foremost about quality not style and architects more than anyone should know that to discriminate against any style, traditional or modern, purely on the basis of ocular prejudice rather than objective performance is the complete antithesis of the pluralism and inclusivity architecture should naturally seek to foster.

It also runs counter to socialist ideas of beauty as expressed by Ruskin himself. For Ruskin visual beauty in and of itself was never the point,

13. <https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/big-names-warn-labour-not-to-fall-for-traditional-housing-design-trend/5129901.article>

14. <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/11/14/opinion-building-better-building-beautiful-commission-sam-jacob/>

15. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2018/11/how-classical-architecture-became-weapon-far-right>

16. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2020/feb/29/classical-beauty-right-wing-donald-trump-buildings>

17. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/07/the-traditionalist-lunatics-have-taken-over-the-asylum>

meaning was. And that meaning, intricately woven and layered into our buildings over time, can only come through age. As Professor Dinah Birch, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Cultural Engagement and Professor of English Literature at the University of Liverpool explains:

“When people talk of beautiful buildings they often intersperse this with beautiful ‘old’ buildings. So when they’re talking about beauty in building, it’s not about what Ruskin referred to as ocular delight but the building’s meaning, its significance, its memory, its connection. That’s what people want, what they don’t want are blank spaces.”<sup>18</sup>

The key word here is “people”. They are the precious commodity the architecture elite all too often forgets and as the next strategic message explains, architects should not dismiss the popularity of traditional architecture as an indication of the public’s intellectual inferiority but see it instead as an opportunity to, in Glasman’s words, “radicalise the concept of tradition”<sup>19</sup> and harness stylistic diversity as a means of re-establishing architecture’s ancient bond with the people it exists to serve.

### 3. To The Public

Tony Blair’s “Education, Education, Education” mantra has slipped into popular phraseology but the new government should develop an equivalent new strapline to characterise how it intends to interact with the public on issues of housing, urban development and beauty: “Listen, Listen, Listen”. For the reality is no politically-inspired revival of urban beauty is possible unless it has the desires and aspirations of the public at its heart.

Policy Exchange polling proves conclusively that if the government did listen, it may learn some surprising things. Such as, and in a gentle sop to the architects who insist otherwise, 85% of the public think new homes should fit in with and not “shock” their more traditional surroundings and Red Wall voters, a constituency that has enjoyed electoral prominence since 2019, overwhelmingly favour traditional architecture.

Policy Exchange’s Building Beautiful programme has also consistently championed the community empowerment and democratic enfranchisement listening to and involving people in the planning process can bring. This is a theme evident throughout its research stretching from the Street Votes proposals launched in the Strong Suburbs (2021) paper and now making their way through the parliamentary legislative process to the new systematic beauty polling mechanism proposed in our imminent paper that seeks to run public votes on completed buildings to gauge public attitudes towards them and inform future planning decisions.

But it is not just the results gained by listening to the public that are important, but the immense social value and prerogative accrued by placing people at the centre of decision-making about the environment they inhabit. Unsurprisingly, this position too falls neatly within the historic arc of English socialism and nowhere is this expressed more

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18. Beauty for the Many, not the Few? Seminar, Policy Exchange, 2019

19. Ibid

20. Ibid

powerfully than in the idea of the home.

It will be impossible to solve Britain's housing crisis without an increase in the supply or quantity of homes but for Ruskin, admittedly living in a time of unprecedented urban expansion, there was a "moral duty" to ensure that the quality of the homes was of the highest standard in order to satisfy the "emotional dimension" of both individuals and society.

In order to maintain "national greatness" he implored that "we should build our homes with "care and patience and fondness and diligent completion", warning that the failure to do and the proliferation instead of "comfortless and unhonoured dwellings are the signs of a great and spreading popular discontent."

For Ruskin therefore, the private quality of our homes – as expressed by the emotional wellbeing of their residents – was directly proportional to the public quantity of our national welfare. This is a critical relationship for any government to remember as, in a civic exchange socialism would instantly recognise, it amplifies housebuilding from a sum of individual parts to a communal representation of the national whole.

Glasman has also identified the concept of home as central to the Labour tradition in that it provides "respite from the endless churn of capitalism". He cites the Garden Cities of Ebenezer Howard, where residents were able to choose for instance that they wanted to live in "streets with others rather than pursue the idea of a home as a solitary resting place", as exemplars of the people-driven design he rightly believes must inform how our built environment is developed:

"There is this indestructible love of a home within the people that is constantly thwarted by both state and market attempts of mass production. So the only way to bring these traditions together is to have the people whose homes are being built absolutely in a central power position in designing those homes."

## 4. To The Poorest

Socialism's first and founding commitment was to the poor so it is both right and inevitable that any credible socialist reassertion of beauty's role in society must offer clear and tangible benefits to the most underprivileged within it. And arguably the most effective means of doing this within a built environment context is via a relentless focus on both the quality and quantity on the one housing typology whose historic lineage extends over broadly the same period as socialism itself: social housing.

Happily, the Labour election manifesto was unambiguous in its commitment to delivering "the biggest increase in social and affordable housebuilding in a generation." But while the need to increase the supply of social housing is indisputable, its quality must be beyond reproach too. This is to avoid the all too familiar mistakes of previous generations where a rush to build and no statutory impetus to build well left swathes of council housing and estates stigmatised with the worst ills of urban

deprivation and antisocial malignancy, further impoverishing the very poor they were devised to nurture.

Beauty can ensure this never happens again. This is not a new strategy, in New York at the turn of the last century, one was as likely to find florid Beaux-Arts facades festooned with volutes, urns and aedicules on a Hell's Kitchen tenement as on a Fifth Avenue mansion. And in London, the world's first council estate, the Boundary Estate, was built in 1899 along the lines of the vistas, tree-lined streets and radiating avenues hitherto reserved for the most prestigious parts of the capital.

It was modernism's eventual spiteful prohibition against decoration and, as we have seen, socialism's repudiation of 'elitist' historicism that changed all this. Furthermore, after being only tentatively adopted in Britain before World War II largely on experimental middle-class showhouses and London Underground stations, after the war, modernism was suddenly recruited to quickly replenish our blitzed housing stock and soon found itself as the de-facto signature style of a rapaciously expanding welfare state. But stripped of historical reference and hostile to decorative ornament, many of its housing estates, tower blocks, hospitals and schools cheated the poor with belligerence instead of beauty.

Increasing and improving council housing has long been a preoccupation of the Building Beautiful programme and the reinstallation of beauty into a new and improved generation of council housing stock will be the subject of an imminent Policy Exchange paper, *Building Beautiful Council Houses*. This seeks to act as an indispensable blueprint for how the highest standards of design quality can be applied to this vital housing type. And any government committed to following it could well do justice to Nandy's poignant reminder that "beautiful things have always mattered to working class people."<sup>21</sup>

## 5. To Developers

As former Levelling Up Secretary of State Michael Gove's frequent judicial standoffs with developers proved, developers do not take kindly to being told what is and isn't beautiful and a housebuilding industry that has made handsome profits from giving the public what it does not necessarily like will barely see the financial necessity of giving them what they do.

Equally, the persistent and erroneous assumption that beauty is expensive still looms large in the corporate consciousness, misinterpreting the reality that aesthetic considerations like scale, form and proportion are cost neutral and wilfully underestimating the commercial value that fine architecture can accrue.

Any new government keen to promote a new generation of built environment beauty must ensure that the developers who typically pay to build the houses, streets, squares and public buildings that comprise that environment are fully invested in achieving it. Because without their support it will fail. Neither a good architect nor a good planner nor a good

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21. Ibid

politician can get a good building built by themselves, funding is key and, unless the state is directly involved, that funding comes almost entirely from the developer.

Which is why, in order to ensure that developers are on board with a new beauty strategy, the government must be unequivocal in endlessly reiterating that beauty brings value and there is a meaningful commercial uplift in providing a better-quality finished architectural product.

There are multiple precedents for this and some of the most compelling come from those developments that have embraced traditional design. Dorset council estimates that Poundbury will have increased local GVA (Gross Value Added) by £105m per annum by 2025.<sup>22</sup> And in Le Plessis-Robinson just outside Paris, comprehensively revived along similar lines, employment has doubled in almost 20 years of redevelopment.

It was once taken for granted that private development would naturally lead to civic enhancement, as the historic development of London's squares illustrates so convincingly. For as long as this no longer remains the case, the government must present developers with incentives to ensure that private profit yields social benefit.

## 6. To Places

“Places matter in a really deep and fundamental way. They're anchors that help define how we feel about the world and a strong sense of place and strong sense of belonging are really, really important.”<sup>23</sup>

Lisa Nandy's quote eloquently captures the centrality of places to a sense of identity and to the socialist dictum that places, neighbourhoods, town and cities are communal concentrations of the shared sense of citizenship that binds individuals in society together.

This is why the Policy Exchange report *Better Places (2023)*, presented a new universal tool capable of measuring placemaking quality, providing an indispensable and accessible means to ensure that planning-stage placemaking commitments are being delivered in the real world. It is also why the preceding report, *A School of Place (2022)*, sought to act upon one of the key recommendations of the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission by proposing the establishment of a new multidisciplinary school dedicated to improving placemaking skills. Building beautiful homes is indivisible from building beautiful places.

While the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper referred repeatedly to the importance of places in economically recalibrating the country, recent history shows that the left has much to be proud of when it comes to recognising the cultural and socio-economic value good places can bestow. The ground-breaking work of the Urban Taskforce set up in the early days of the Blair premiership and chaired by the late Lord Rogers was instrumental in sparking an urban renaissance within British cities that heralded an increase in design standards in public buildings, stressed the importance of densification and sparked a renewed awareness about

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22. <https://poundbury.co.uk/about/economic-impact/>

23. *Beauty for the Many, not the Few?* Seminar, Policy Exchange, 2019

the importance of public space. Between 2002 and 2015, the taskforce's legacy was evident in the exponential rise in the populations of British city centres by as much as 149% in Manchester, 163% in Birmingham and 181% in Liverpool.

Equally the establishment of the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment (CABE) in 1999 provided meaningful statutory guidance and leadership on the attainment of an improved public realm - at least until it succumbed to clubland elitism and became too politically swayed by the architecture profession's habitual internecine battles and was unceremoniously abolished in a 2011 spending review. The re-establishment of such a body, with a fresh, inclusive, strategic mandate to procure quality, would not only resume the long line of statutory design guidance first established by the setting up of the Royal Fine Art Commission in 1924, but it could go a long way to reassuring both the public and professionals that the new government is serious in its commitment to beauty.

## 7. To the World

One of the many perplexing contradictions of British architecture is that while a good deal (not all) of its contemporary domestic applications may frustrate and disappoint, internationally it is considered an exemplar British design brand and cultural asset and helps the UK wield significant soft power. Yet, there might be one symbolic way of enhancing this international image to an even greater degree while restoring our domestic reputation for aesthetic diligence at home: finally agreeing and embarking on a restoration plan for the Houses of Parliament.

Admittedly signing-off on a multi-billion-pound restoration programme to save a historic building steeped in elitist privilege that also happens to house public representatives in whom public trust in recent years has plummeted might not immediately appear to be the most sensible deployment of either socialist energy or fiscal firepower in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. However, there are several cogent reasons to take this course of action.

First the building is crumbling and is dangerously susceptible to a catastrophic Notre Dame style fire, the onset of which would be a colossal and potentially insurmountable international embarrassment for any sitting government. Secondly it would present a traditionalist olive branch to the conservative right, as well as shaming them into public acknowledgement of the prior government's endless prevarication over the issue.

Thirdly, as we have seen British architecture is already a significant international export. British architects have already designed the revamped German parliament building, Russia (and Europe's) tallest building, the USA's national museum of African American history, Dubai's most iconic hotel and, in France's Millau Viaduct, the tallest bridge in the world. Restoring Parliament would present a relatively rare opportunity to apply



these skills to a domestic building with an incomparable international profile, boosting the export of British architecture and design even further and helping promote growth in our already buoyant services industry.

And finally, in saving this most beautiful of buildings, one of the most recognisable and iconic on Earth and an emblematic symbol of British democracy that has inspired other parliament buildings from as far afield as Ottawa to Budapest, it would project an unequivocal message to the world of British confidence in the enduring, timeless principle of beauty and of the new government's unassailable commitment to protecting it not just in Westminster, but across a rejuvenated British urban and rural landscape.

While Ruskin hated the "effeminate and effectless" architecture of the Houses of Parliament and savagely dismissed all parliamentary debate as "darkness voluble"<sup>24</sup>, this latter national undertaking is one he would surely have relished.

24. <https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/our-dithering-politicians-should-look-to-the-genius-of-john-ruskin-for-inspiration-to-get-us-out-of-this-mess-a4094461.html>  
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## Conclusion

History is littered with examples of political establishments seeking to co-opt beauty for political gain. From the Catholic Church's hugely successful invention of the Baroque in the 16th century to counteract Protestant insurgency by assigning tremendous temporal form to the divine, to the palatial Moscow metro stations conceived by Stalin as glittering architectural klaxons loudly advertising how well Communism treated its people, beauty has frequently been political.

The latter example is particularly relevant within a socialist context and provides a compelling illustrative precedent of the extent to which government, if it so wishes, has the power to imbed beauty into our urban fabric and national life. Within the first 100 days of the new government and informed by these seven strategic messages and their potential deployment by means of a landmark Growing Beautiful commission, this is a process the new government will hopefully seek to progress.

But if it does so it must remember one important thing. As Policy Exchange and Building Beautiful have always argued, at its core and despite relentless political exploitation throughout history, the pursuit of beauty is a human trait rather than a political one. So whether rich or poor, young or old, black or white, socialist, conservative, liberal or none, we all have a deep innate yearning for beauty's ability to enrich our lives. This is an instinctive humanistic compulsion Ruskin and Morris knew only too well.

In recent years the left has been fond of proclaiming that 'diversity is our strength'. If they give every citizen equal access to beauty in our shared national life, then a new Labour government could finally prove it.



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