

Aesthetic quality as an aspect of sustainable buildings?

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Abstract

SuPerBuildings (Sustainability and Performance assessment and benchmarking of Buildings) is an FP7 EU Project coordinated by VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland. Its main objective is to develop and select sustainability indicators for buildings with a particular emphasis on the validity of the data and the reliability of the selected indicators. Key indicators have been selected, improved or developed, and documented through a structured format. They cover the 3 pillars of sustainable development, but not all the related issues. Some are of particular interest and include added-value because they have been newly developed, as land use, cultural heritage, aesthetic quality or long term stability of economic value. It seems clear as regards to this last group of indicators that further development is needed beyond the state of the art.

Cultural heritage and architectural quality considered in terms of aesthetic quality are the two indicators developed by SuPerBuildings in relation to the subject of concern “Society – Culture and Architecture”. Although they are certainly interrelated since the aesthetic quality of a building is a determining factor for it to be considered an important part of the cultural heritage over time, one of the early decisions made regarding the content and scope of the article this presentation refers to was to treat them separately and focus on aesthetic quality.



AESTHETIC QUALITY

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Aesthetic Quality

Architectural quality – aesthetic quality

- Developed by SuPerBuildings as a quality indicator through four sub-indicators.

Sub-indicators

- Architectural quality in the design stage (design competition, considering alternative design options).
- Architectural quality in the tender stage (as obligation on the contractor).
- “Educated” decision making (as part of a design competition, considering alternative design options).
- Public art in/on/around buildings (mandatory inclusion of art work).



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AS AN ASPECT OF SUSTAINABLE BUILDINGS?

Cultural heritage and architectural quality considered in terms of aesthetic quality are the two indicators developed by SuPerBuildings in relation to the subject of concern “Society – Culture and Architecture”.

When addressing architectural quality SuPerBuildings breaks it down to functionality and aesthetic quality even though many might argue that the division is not so clear and very often both aspects overlap. Since there are already a number of indicators in different existing building assessment schemes that define functional requirements (e.g. accessibility, wayfinding, flexibility, adaptability, etc.), a conscious decision was made to “*focus SuPerBuildings’ efforts on the further development of aesthetic quality*”.



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Discussion

Questions to be answered:

- What are the attributes that can be related to aesthetic quality? How can they be measured?
- Is aesthetic quality an aspect of sustainable building? Can its validity be sufficiently justified in relation to some of the main subjects of concern?

Method followed:

- Literature review
- Article based on a series of interviews with experts (7 in total)
- Parallel discussions (the question of taste)



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Results (I)

From the interviews:

- In general, the distinction between functional and aesthetic qualities is accepted as valid for practical purposes, although there are many cases in which they overlap.
- Defining what is exactly aesthetic quality is a difficult task even for experts.
- Aesthetic quality is commonly perceived as related to the visual experience.
- The difference between qualitative, quantitative and process indicators is not necessarily evident for experts. As a consequence, any attempt to “measure” aesthetic quality faces strong resistance.



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Thank you for attention

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Results (II)

From the interviews:

- There's a risk of ending up with “easy recipes for nice buildings”.
- Research on “neuroaesthetics” might shed some light on how we perceive architectural space. Warning about the “neuroscientific approach”.
- The “question of taste” as a potential obstacle for measuring aesthetic quality.
- General consensus on the need to include aesthetic quality as an aspect of sustainable building.
- Multidisciplinary research is needed in order to develop adequate indicators to measure the aesthetic quality of the built environment.



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