Aristotle’s Most Beautiful City

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In Book VII, Chapter Four of the Politics, Aristotle notes that ‘beauty is realised in number and magnitude, and the city which combines magnitude with good order must necessarily be the most beautiful’. The statement is part of an argument that sees ‘good or beautiful’ as a principle indicative of whether the city has been arranged well or badly. In fact, the argument is about the size of the human population, not about the material construction of the city. However, in Chapter Eleven he uses virtually the same principle to propose the manner in which private dwellings should be disposed in the built city. The Greek ‘polis’ like the English ‘city’ clearly has two senses: the constituted political community and the built city. This paper will explore these two ways in which ‘beauty’ shows up in Book VII of the Politics.

In Book VII, which can stand alone as a complete discussion, Aristotle explores his best possible city. In flows from the distinction critical for any interpretation of the Politics in IV, 1 of four senses of the best constitution for a political community: the best possible constitution; the best that circumstances such as the character of people and territory will allow; the best achievable given the present constitution of the community; and, finally, the most practical that most cities might be able to achieve. The constitution of Book VII is what ‘one would pray for above all’, because it is the city that has been well-provided for in those matters over which fortune has authority. In other words, it is the city that is blessed with good territory, good resources, manageable neighbours and a thoughtful and spirited population. Curiously, the supposition of the ‘best possible’ allows Aristotle to consider in detail the material conditions of the most desirable polis. It also allows him to test the limits of political possibility. We may imagine wonderful cities but what are the limits when the cities have to be constructed out of human and natural materials? How does one achieve a balance in constitution and law that justly distributes a plurality of often incommensurate goods among a mass of citizens, who are themselves qualitatively different?

Aristotle says little about what constitutes beauty or the beautiful in the Politics, apart from the cryptic comment already quoted. That phrase turns out, however, to be a footnote to his major discussion of the beautiful in the Poetics and to a defining paragraph in the Metaphysics. The first section of this paper will turn to those discussions to clarify his understanding of beauty, before returning to the Politics to investigate first the beauty of the built city and then the beauty of the constituted city.

Beauty in the Poetics and Metaphysics

Aristotle does not subscribe to Plato’s idea of the Beautiful as the highest principle of things and identical with the Good, just as he does not subscribe to the Ideas in general. Rather beauty is to be found in natural and artificial things. Nor does he put anything forth that would suggest that beauty is one of what later scholastics would call the transcendental modes of being. In fact, he says very little about it, though this does not mean that beauty is unimportant to him. It appears across his works – biological, ethical, political, metaphysical and poetic – and it is given the status of a principle or cause. I quote, ‘for the good and the beautiful


2 Note that there is a third important sense of polis, which is that of the country as a whole, namely the constituted political community together with all its territory, which includes its agricultural lands. Attica defined the full territory of the polis of Athens in this sense. This may be the primary sense of polis but will not be the focus of this paper.


4 Politics VII, 13 (1332a32), Lord, p. 218.
are the origin of both knowledge and the movement of many things. His sharpest description of beauty is in Metaphysics XIII, 3. "The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness. Order, we will return to. Symmetry or proportion or harmony was a standard note of beauty in Greek thinking, and while it might well be explored, it appears to be fairly unproblematic. Definiteness or limitedness carries intimations of form and shape, but also, as we shall see in the Poetics, of size or amplitude or magnitude. For the purposes of this paper and with an eye on the Politics, we shall use the terms 'order', 'proportion' and 'magnitude' to refer to the essential elements of beauty.

It is the question of magnitude that is most clearly raised in the Poetics, Chapter 7. How long should a dramatic tragedy be? Aristotle answers in terms of beauty. 'To be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also of a certain definite magnitude. If an animal were too small to be easily seen, it could not be appreciated in all its parts; if an animal were so large as not to be able to be seen in a single view, we would lose all sense of its unity. In applying this to drama, Aristotle suggests a guide for the length of a play — 'the longer the story, consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is by reason of its magnitude.' In other words, it should be ample but not too big to grasp; generous but not gross.

In the Poetics, the discussion of beauty and magnitude sits inside the discussion of the integrity and unity of the plot. The plot of a tragedy is a whole, but it is a whole made up of parts, which need to be put together in an appropriate order. There is much to be said here, but it is sufficient for our purposes that the drama will have a beginning, a middle and an end. But also connected to integrity and unity is the selection that the poet makes. The lives portrayed in a tragedy are in their historical context full of extraneous actions that are true but not relevant to the story being told. The poet selects and shapes actions, so that the story is a single whole and so that all its elements contribute to its effect. This imposition of order has intimations of both formal and final causality.

Before returning to the Politics, we need to make some connection between writing poetry and building cities. Both, according to Aristotle, are forms of making (poiesis), which is identified in Ethics VI, 4 with art (technē), and which is distinguished from doing or acting (praxis). 'Art', says Aristotle, 'is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course or reasoning'. What is made is something outside the agent. Poetry, on the one hand, falls into the sub-genre of imitation (mimesis), but as we have already seen, imitation is not just a matter of copying. The poet selects and orders the actions, emotions and elements of character of his subjects in order to tell a story. The whole has a form and is guided by an end. Building, on the other hand, is not without imitation. It is an Aristotelian commonplace that 'art imitates nature', and again this does not mean copying. Nature, for Aristotle, is 'a principle of motion and of stationariness', we might call it a vital energy that draws natural things towards their fulfillment and perfection. The art of the builder is to select materials out of what is available and to harness the natural energies of these materials for some useful purpose, while at the same time supplying for 'the deficiencies of nature'.

The Beauty of the Built City

In approaching the built city, Aristotle first gives attention to its placement and disposition. Health is his first concern and so the city should be on sloping ground well disposed to wind and sun. Other concerns are the placement of political and religious institutions, military preparedness, and four causes: people and territory; constitution; politicians and law-makers; the good life.

It is to be noted that neither the Greeks nor the medieval West had a notion of 'art' or 'fine art' that was valued for itself and displayed in museums where it would be admired simply for its beauty apart from its function of decorating buildings or evoking the divine in temples or tombs. In a paper prepared for this conference, Derek Allen showed how the modern understanding of 'fine art' arose during the Renaissance. See his 'Art and the Metaphysical: A Challenge to Aesthetic Orthodoxy' at www.home.net4speed.com.au/derek.allan/artandmetaphysical.htm. Accessed 21/09/10.

11 Nicomachean Ethics VI, 4 (1140a10), Barnes, p. 1800.
12 Physics VI, 2 (194a22), Barnes, p. 331.
13 Physics, I, 1 (192b15), Barnes, p. 329.
15 The discussion of this section is drawn mainly from Politics VIII, 11 & 12 but also 5 & 6.

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availability of adequate water and even of twin supplies of water for drinking and water for other purposes. Markets should be close but not where they will dirty the city, and similarly the city needs ready access to the sea and transport routes, but it should not be so close that the citizens are corrupted by too ready contact with sailors.

If the city is to be beautiful, Aristotle prefers the new design of Hippodamus, 16 which consists of houses in straight rows along wide and pleasant streets. This contrasts with the ancient method of building cities defensively which saw dwellings built in concentric circles around a citadel and in such a way that the connecting streets did not give direct access to the centre. 17 The difference presents a difficulty. To the eye of a resident, the ancient form of city lacks the order, proportion and magnitude that would make it beautiful, yet military defence is necessary. He proposes a compromise in which the outer regions of the city are designed in the ancient manner as well as surrounded by a defensive wall, while the inner regions are designed on a larger scale with straight and orderly streets. Thus the city ‘will be in a fine condition with a view to safety as well as ordered beauty’. 18

Aristotle cuts short his discussion of the design of his most beautiful city, because too much talk is a waste of time. ‘It is not difficult to understand such things, but more so to do them: speaking about them is a work of prayer, having them come about, a work of chance’. 19 What he means is that although we could design a beautiful city in thought, for the most part the design of cities is ruled by chance: the territory that was available; where a group of people first settled; decisions made at different times by different individuals and groups; people doing what they will; accidents of various kinds. If the city is beautiful, it is truly blessed.

Before we leave the discussion of the built city, we should note of two comments that Aristotle makes. First, he believes that a city will be differently designed if it is to suit different regimes. ‘A fortified height is characteristic of oligarchy and monarchy; levelness is characteristic of democracy; neither of these is characteristic of aristocracy, but rather a number of strong places’. 20 It is not hard to see what he means physically, but the significant point is that the design of the city, apart from mere accident, will have clear relation to the character of the people.

The second comment relates to military preparedness. Aristotle gives considerable attention to military matters both in the design of the built city and in the constitution of the citizens. He concludes his discussion of a beautiful but adequately fortified city with the comment, ‘for men will not even attempt an attack in the first place against those who are well prepared’. 21 Although defensively prepared, the people of Aristotle’s best possible city will not be warlike. This takes us back to the discussion of Chapters 2 and 3 of Book VII where he asked which of the active or political life and the thoughtful or philosophic life was best for individuals and for cities as a whole. The dialogue is complex, but he makes the point that a city given only to action will almost certainly be warlike in trying to conquer its neighbours. 22 While a city does need to be active, it also needs to be thoughtful. The beautiful built city will be one in which people put their minds sufficiently to thoughtful action in practical matters but in which they are also more given to philosophy and the arts. The built city of an active and warlike people will necessarily lack beauty due to the highly defensive character of its construction.

The Beauty of the Constituted City

Let us now return to Chapter 4, where Aristotle asks how large the population of a city should be. He argues both empirically and from principle against the view that the city will necessarily become greater as its population increases without limit. He grants that a city with too small a population will fall, because it will not have the range of human capacities that are needed for it to function well. On the other hand, if the population is too great it will be unmanageable, and citizens, who need to appoint one another to office, will not be familiar with each other. He concludes that a city will be best composed of ‘the greatest excess of number with a view to self-sufficiency of life that is readily surveyable’. 23

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16 Aristotle discusses Hippodamus in Politics II, 8.
17 Such a design can still be seen on the island of Naxos in the Cyclades with rows of houses circling the 13th Century Venetian citadel.
18 Politics VII, 11 (1330b30), Lord, p. 214.
19 Politics VII, 12 (1331b19-21), Lord, p. 216.
20 Politics VII, 11 (1330b17-20), Lord, p. 214. One could argue that Melbourne is geographically suited to democracy, for who can even find Toorak, which is on flat ground near the river? Sydney is suited to oligarchy, with is high eastern and northern suburbs. Auckland would ideally be aristocratic with the noble families each settled on a volcano, but it is, indeed, democratic with people living in the valleys, the volcanoes made into public parks and the city built too close to the port.
21 Politics VII, 11 (1331a17), Lord, p. 215.
22 George Bush’s America is a good example of a political community given too much to action and too little to thought, with consequent tendency to war. No amount of reasoning could move him from his intended course.
23 Politics VII, 4 (1326b23), Lord, p. 205.
It is in the argument from principle that beauty is used. If the city is to be beautiful, it will need both magnitude and a certain defining principle or order. It is clear from the context that ‘order’ relates both to the constitution of the city and the end for which the city was formed. In other words, ‘order’ in the context of beauty draws in both formal and final causality. The formal cause of a city is its constitution, which is the arrangement of offices and functions among the citizens. A city is not just a chance multitude, but a multitude of people who are different and who have different skills and capacities, which when well ordered make the city self-sufficient and enable the citizens and the city as a whole to live well. Bringing this order to be is the work of the politician and legislator.

There are, of course, many forms that a city can take - democratic, oligarchic, republican, aristocratic, monarchic, tyrannical - but each of these is defined by a sense of what the good life is and to whom it belongs. In Aristotle’s best possible city of Book VII, the good life is the life of culture and virtue, which is the topic of Chapter I. Aristotle’s best citizens will be cultivated in the liberal arts and philosophy, practiced in the political arts and enriched by the range of virtues, moral and intellectual found in the Nicomachean Ethics. In regard to the built city, the virtues that will be important will be those that relate to wealth. The virtues that Aristotle attaches to wealth are moderation and liberality. A poor city lacks capacity to build well; a wealthy city needs the guidance of virtue.

Conclusion and Examples

I will conclude this paper with some examples of what I think Aristotle would find beautiful and what he would find not beautiful in Sydney. I will not consider the city as a whole, as that would be too complex, but rather three specific constructions: the Anzac Bridge, the Blues Point Tower and the housing development at Pulpit Point in Hunters Hill. The first two are linked in that they are in sight of each other and in that during its construction the architect of Blues Point Tower, Harry Seidler, condemned the Anzac Bridge for being ugly.

The Anzac Bridge is, indeed, beautiful in the terms we have been exploring. It has magnitude and symmetry and order that follows from drawing out the best of the materials with which it is constructed. Concrete functions well under compression and steel functions well under tension. The design has used each at its best and in minimal quantities. Stung by Seidler’s attack, the engineers said that they came up with this design, because there were so many telephone cables in the harbour that they dared not put pillars into the water, neither permanently nor during construction. Since then the design has spread around the world and has been used in a number of much larger bridges on the Yangtze River in China. What it lacks, unlike the Harbour Bridge is sympathetic architecture around it.

Aristotle would have laughed at the Blues Point Tower and criticised its architect in much the same way as he criticised Hippodamus for his excessive flumboyance. It is not in any sense imitative of nature, of its setting or even of the materials out of which it is made. Rather, it is expressive of its creator. One cannot miss it. Recent renovations have made it less startling than it originally was, but it remains difficult to call it beautiful.

26 The Anzac Bridge was designed by the Roads Traffic Authority and opened in 1995 and named the Glebe Island Bridge. The main deck is 805 metres long and the span between the 120 metre towers is 345 metres. The deck was constructed in 10 metre sections working in both directions from the towers and supported eventually by 128 cables. (See RTA website.) Its name was changed to Anzac Bridge on Armistice Day in 1998 and statues of an Australian and New Zealand soldier were erected at the western end. The renaming appears to have been recognition of its stature as a bridge.

27 Politics II, 8.

28 I do not think it is too strong a claim to see Seidler’s work as rejection of art as imitative for art as expressive, in the mode begun by the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth century by people such as Schiller, Schelling and Schleiermacher. See Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 13, where he writes of a culture of ‘authenticity’. ‘I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority’. Taylor, p. 475.

29 The Blues Point Tower was completed in 1961 by property developer Dick Dusseldorp (Lend Lease) and architect Harry Seidler. It is 83 metres tall with 25 stories and 144 apartments. It has been claimed that ‘as a piece of modernist architecture, it exudes strength, dignity and honesty of materials’ and that ‘Seidler’s use of offset windows creates a
The Pulpit Point construction was a single development that set out to turn a disused oil depot and wharf in the expensive suburb of Hunters Hill into luxurious housing. When one walks through it, there are senses in which it is defensive, with narrow streets, wall to wall housing and warning signs for strangers. Aristotle would have seen here excessive wealth untamed by either moderation or liberality.

Bibliography


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30 At Pulpit Point Estate, you can go for a spin in your cruiser, enjoy tennis and a swim in the pool, and walk about 100 metres to your luxurious home for lunch or some other sustenance. This Hunters Hill housing estate, with stunning water views to the city and a 112-berth private marina, offers a million-dollar lifestyle for residents’. (Ken Mathers, Sydney Morning Herald 3 November 1994.) Plans to build a high-arise development after the Mobile Oil storage depot was sold in 1988 were vigorously fought by residents and the present development is a compromise. Bells Access Control Systems maintains a high tech centrally monitored security system over the whole area. (http://bellsaccess.com.au/portfolio.htm)

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