The ugly truth

Stephen Bayley, best-selling author of *Ugly: The Aesthetics of Everything*, sees ugliness as a necessary corrective that stimulates a deeper appreciation of beauty.

What is ugly? Not the magnificent power station. No, the way that Bernd and Hilla Becher photographed the decrepit infrastructure of the Ruhr made sooty industry beautiful, surely?

When the designers were working on the jacket of my new book, someone suggested including a question mark after the title and giving the whole a mirror finish. Curious browsers would be immediately confronted with a deadly question. How beautiful are you? Tact prevailed and we used a scary detail from a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare instead. We put Ernö Goldfinger’s Trellick Tower on the back cover.

We all enjoy beauty. But an appreciation of ugliness is necessary to it. The beautiful and the ugly are not opposites, but aspects of the same thing. Concerned what people think of your house? Wish your partner were better looking? In dieting, getting a tan or going to the gym, choosing a Weimaraner over a rescue mutt, visiting an exhibition or shopping, we are trying to acquire beauty to get a personal competitive advantage. But don’t worry if you feel ugly: perceptions change.

In 1890, some London advertisers, tired of conventions of their trade, started The Ugly Modelling Agency. They wanted faces with character, not bland perfection. Look at the shots from the time and you wonder what the fuss was about. The agency survives as Ugly Models, whose clients include Diesel and Calvin Klein. Meanwhile, ever since the Francophile Nancy Mitford popularised the expression, we have had the idea of julie-laide, a woman who can be attractive and ugly at the same time. Mitford was herself an example. So too is Jeannie Morean.

‘Beauty’, however defined, is not necessarily attractive. And ugliness is not always repulsive. Besides, tastes change, erasing aesthetic certainties. This is a truth so disturbing that most of our assumptions about art are immediately undermined. For example, two years before it was finished, the great Paris intello of the day railed against the Eiffel Tower, denouncing it as an ugly, hateful bolted-tin column; now it’s one of the most loved monuments.

John Ruskin, Victorian booster of Nature’s beauty, campaigned manically against the ugly intrusion of the steam railway into the unspoilt, tranquil Lake District. And he despised the introduction of the noisy vaporetto into the dignified Venice he regarded as his private intellectual playpen. Now we see each machine as quaint and lovely, even beautiful. Back in Ruskin’s London, the Albert Memorial, now a national architectural treasure regarded as fondly as hot buttered toast and the shipping forecast, was described as verminous and crumbling.

Yet the same Nature that Ruskin thought inevitably beautiful can be repellent. We are now required by custom to admire Alpine views, but mountains were once thought disgusting: dangerous, scary and home to demons and bandits.

Nature can be ugly. Not all plants conform to beautiful conventions: the Amorphophallus Titanum is a vast, hideous, swollen phallic thing that stinks of death: it is known as the corpse flower. Darwin believed breeding good-looking children is a survival characteristic: I, for example, may feel the need to fuse my premium genetic material with yours so humanity continues in the same fine style. But there may be a mathematical, as well as biological, basis to conventional ideas of the beautiful. The Greeks believed beauty can be described by numbers. Classical sculpture was based on strict ratios and Classical architecture is pleasing because its proportions are based on the field of vision of the eye.

These rules may still exist. I know a designer in the car industry who keeps a photograph of Claudia Schiffer’s face on his laptop. He has an app that allows him to distort the image in any dimension. This he does as a demonstration to show how at a specific moment, what was beautiful becomes, one millimetre too far, unacceptable.

Besides measurement, another factor changing our perceptions is time. ‘Familiarity is a magician that is cruel to beauty, but kind to ugliness’ according to Victorian novelist Maria Louise Ramé. This might not be as mad as it sounds. It’s beauty that is evanescent, fragile, dismaying a subject of measurements. When something becomes familiar we tolerate it and tolerance can grow into affection. As Serge Gainsbourg remarked, ‘ugliness is superior to beauty because it lasts longer’.

We get the word ‘ugly’ from an Old Norse word ugga which means ‘aggressive’, hence the expression an ‘ugly customer’. It’s this sense of violence that is initially disturbing, but this also means there is much more variety and surprise in ugliness. Beauty is a sedative, predictable and soothing rather than challenging. Is being sedated and softened better than being stimulated?

The strange truth is, too much beauty would be intolerable, an awful world of meticulously cropped lawns and starched linen. We only enjoy the ephemeral deliciousness of beauty if we have an active concept of ugliness. Heaven needs hell.

A measure of ugliness is essential to keep our appetites alive. So, exactly how much ugliness should we maintain in our world? Should we encourage its production? What’s the optimum exposure to ugliness? Should there be quotas?

An even stranger truth is that ugliness fascinates. One of the most popular pictures in London’s National Gallery is by 10th-century Flemish master Quinten Massys (right). Known as *The Ugly Duchess*, the sitter suffers from a bone disorder causing facial deformities. In the gallery shop, the *Ugly Duchess* postcard sells as well as Claude Monet’s serene *Water-Lily Pond*.

Ugliness deserves to be understood, but when you begin to examine it, the idea disappears.
It is, for example, possible to look at steaming, suppurating landfill and find a thing of strange beauty. See the A38/M6 interchange from the air and it is surely a thing of transcendent beauty. The murderous atrocity of the B-52 is also sublime. Equally, it is only a matter of time before the Brutalist Trellick Tower, loathed by thatched-roof sentimentalists, acquires an admired period gloss. Already Grade II listed, soon, Prince Charles may speak fondly of its stained concrete.

Ugly cars were once explained by the ignorance or incompetence of their manufacturers. The AMC Gremlin and Morris Marina are just two examples from recent history, but now there is so much design competence in the industry that creating beauty is easy. So Ferrari, with impeccable credentials in the manufacture of gorgeous automobile sculpture, has not made a beautiful car for a long time: its signature curves have been stolen by Koreans.

So, at the end of beauty’s road, Ferrari design is seeking confrontation. When Renault entered the large car market, it decided not to compete with the industry-norm of German Gute Form, but introduced the ugly Vel Satis. In products, the iPhone’s success is to a degree based on a delicious physical appeal that can be no further refined. Whatever Apple does next, it is unlikely to be more beautiful.

Our obsession with beauty and our fear of ugliness goes back to the mid-19th century, when Lewis Carroll, contemporary of Ruskin, coined the term ‘uglification’ to describe the changes to town and country that industry had forced. Ever since, we have fretted about what is good and bad. Like it or not, we are all in a continuing debate about aesthetics. US art critic, Peter Scheldahl, said ‘Beauty is ... no big deal, but the lack of it is’. Maybe, but if everything were beautiful ... nothing would be.

Stephen Bayley will talk on beauty at the AR/RCA Architecture & Lecture at 6.30pm on 19 February at the V&A.