Ahead of October’s ABB LEAF Awards, we visit Peckham Library in London with Katrin Förster, global key account manager of the event’s headline partner, and architect Dr Yael Reisner. The two discuss the way we evaluate buildings, what qualities we should be rewarding in architecture, and whether practitioners should be more willing to think about the role of beauty in their judgments.

How we judge that we’ve built
their work may fill coffee table tomes and design blogs, but it’s a rare architect that claims they aspire to beauty. “There’s just such a deep taboo,” sighs Dr Yael Reisner, the architect and academic who has dedicated her professional life to returning aesthetics to polite conversation. “In the 20th century it became empty, bourgeois, shallow and not progressive – associated really with all the things that no one is interested in. It’s a cultural bias that we haven’t even defined. The attitude is just that beauty belongs in the beauty salon.”

Against that, Reisner maintains that beauty is an inescapable part of the discipline. In fact, she points to the burgeoning field of neuroaesthetics to argue that beautiful forms are not a by-product of human culture and achievement, but a prime cause of it.

It’s a tantalising thesis, but, with the 19th ABB LEAF Awards taking place in Berlin on 24 October, there are practical matters at hand. As the judging panel gathers to assess entries from all across the world, it’s worth asking whether beauty can be used as a meaningful standard when it comes to picking winners for 18 architectural categories spanning everything from ‘Best Tall Building’ to ‘Best Regenerative Impact’.

These are questions that Katrin Förster, the headline partner’s global key account manager, can’t help pondering. For her, Reisner is among the thinkers with the most interesting perspectives on how we evaluate architecture.

After years of engaging with architects through awards partnerships and one-off exhibitions, it was a natural progression for the electrification, automation and robotics multinational to begin providing more tailored programmes of funding and technological support to individual practitioners. “Over the past five years, we’ve also been supporters of the Women in Architecture Awards,” Förster explains. “But instead of just sponsoring a table at the celebration, which lasts one night and impacts a select few guests, it makes more sense to support a woman’s work on something significant and relevant to architects on a wider scale.” That’s one of the main reasons why ABB will be the headline partner for the 2019 Tallinn Architecture Biennale (TAB), which Reisner is curating under the title ‘Beauty Matters’.

Förster and Reisner are sat in 2005 LEAF Award winner Will Alsop’s Peckham Library, a location Reisner chose both for the building’s “beautiful moments” and in memory of Alsop, who died last year. “I think so highly of him,” she says, recalling her interview with the British architect as part of her 2010 book Architecture and Beauty, among countless other meetings. “He really looked differently at how a library could work here, with the different forms and materials of the pods creating smaller spaces within a bigger space, and the use of colour, too – in the children’s room they look at the world outside through pink glass.”

It’s a telling detail to pick out in the context of this discussion, and one that sticks in Förster’s mind. “Funnilly enough, I always thought an architect would want to create beauty,” she admits, “but when you go to awards, it’s never the most beautiful building that wins. ‘Beauty’ is not a category. It’s always the ‘best’. And best doesn’t necessarily mean beautiful, right? But it doesn’t exclude beauty either. It’s a mixture of many different aspects that makes a building win a category.”

Reisner agrees, but thinks the best and most beautiful aren’t necessarily that distinct. “The paradox,” as she puts it, “is that good architecture and brilliant buildings are still mostly judged by their capacity to produce an attractive aesthetic experience, even though, for such a long time, architects have claimed their design processes aren’t engaged with aesthetic concerns.” Indeed, there’s an interesting correlation between the denigration of beauty in architectural theory and the rise of the practice of judging and recognising ‘the best’ through architectural awards.

**Beauty and the brain**

The main influence on Reisner’s thought is University College London professor of neuroaesthetics Semir Zeki, who highlights the correlation between the experience of beauty and increased activity in the brain’s medial orbitofrontal cortex. Though this is not a definition, it’s a specific, measurable characteristic – and, importantly, it’s one that Zeki has recorded in individuals experiencing beauty across fields as diverse as painting, music and physics.

In a sense, then, there is an element of objectivity that corresponds with every subjective aesthetic judgment. It’s just that by this account, instead of a specific shared property, the thing every beautiful experience has in common takes place in the human brain. Moreover, Zeki’s earlier research into our perception of colour demonstrated the dynamic sense in which the brain constructs reality by stabilising and abstracting sensory inputs.

For Reisner, Zeki’s work shows that for content that many architects assume, but an invaluable interlocutor for content that many architects assume, but an invaluable interlocutor in the continual negotiation with our surroundings by which we acquire knowledge, make meaning and ultimately flourish. She approvingly cites theoretical physicist Paul Dirac’s dictum that, in the wake of the theory of relativity, one of an array of theories that was favoured for its beauty before it was conclusively proved, “we have to change the principle of simplicity into a principle of mathematical beauty”. As Zeki has explained, “If [an equation] is beautiful, then the chances are higher that it will be true. But ‘beautiful’ implies that there is something in it that satisfies the brain.”

Precisely what that something might be remains an open question, but Reisner finds the abiding concern with beauty in the sciences deeply moving. After growing up in socialist Tel Aviv, a culture she feels prized intellect above everything else, and then specialising in a discipline bewitched by programme and function, Zeki’s research into beauty gave Reisner a theoretical home. “It’s the mathematicians who never left it,” she says, “and the humanities, arts and architecture that made the word taboo. Today, I think mathematicians might be the only ones who still have a language for beauty and an appreciation for its importance.”

In Reisner’s experience, most architects today are loath to lay claim to a visual language, let alone a way to discuss beauty as a path to knowledge. “Asking them whether beauty leads towards truth just makes them roll their eyes,” she says, thudding back from her mathematical revery. Still, whatever they might insist, and whichever way their eyes might be spinning, Reisner maintains that every...
great architect wields their aesthetic sense as a secret weapon. “They just cannot turn off their visual abilities,” she says with a laugh.

“What I got from neuroscience is that civilisation couldn’t exist without the pleasure of beauty,” the Israeli-born architect continues. “We talk a lot about sustainable building today, but if we really want to achieve that, we need to let aesthetics become part of the equation. Evolutionarily, we need it for our health and well-being.”

Förster is in firm agreement here, though she comes to her conclusion from a new perspective. The duo’s different emphases are appropriately complementary. For Reisner, exposure to beauty contributes to humanity’s well-being, and for Förster, it’s by taking care of our well-being first before we can open up ourselves to experience beauty. “If you are not feeling well and secure, beauty is much more difficult to appreciate,” she says, smiling. “It makes sense to embrace new technologies that enhance the health and mood of people in buildings by improving air and light quality, and offering more comfort and safety. The beauty of function is combined with an overall aesthetic. Everything belongs together.”

That’s a particularly important point for Reisner. For her, beauty is an elusive combination of complex factors, which means new technologies need to be used holistically. The advances in digital production, robotics and automation being pioneered by ABB are already having an impact in academia, where she feared earlier digital design tools were motivating students to think of structure as an end in itself.

“But,” stresses Reisner, returning to the topic of architectural awards, “trying to make all these positive impacts in different areas and categories doesn’t mean our buildings will necessarily be good. Judging only by how buildings fit society or how they answer specific neighbourhood needs on an objectified level means we might reward ugly buildings, but if we allow aesthetics to count as something really important, it will bring with it lots of other qualities as well.”

At the heart of what matters
Both Reisner and ABB have specific aims when it comes to the TAB. While Reisner plans exhibitions, judges competitions and organises symposiums in an attempt to draw the first tentative mentions of beauty from her fellow designers, ABB is looking to educate visitors about smart building automation. “One reason why we are supporting events like TAB, the World Architecture Festival and the LEAF Awards,” Förster explains, “is to make the architectural community aware of new technologies. In the end, the architect is the consultant to the client and they want to know the relevant solutions available to design environmentally and human-friendly buildings.”

ABB’s support for Reisner’s own curatorial work is a good example of how technological expertise can define a project. From Peckham Library, she’s going to a more traditional London office to meet with an ABB lighting engineer. If anything, her current environs have sharpened her focus on using her partner’s products to cultivate a very specific atmosphere for the TAB curatorial exhibition.

That said, even the world’s most impressively automated biennale isn’t going to overturn a cultural bias as deep rooted as that which privileges content over form. As Reisner explains, many of the entries to the TAB ‘New habitats, new beauties’ vision competition, which specifically pointed out that “without beauty, any progressive design fails”, still revelled in the old predilection. “There were endless containers,” she sighs. “Some of that’s about recycling, but a lot of it is almost like saying, ‘I’m not interested in anything aesthetic here – this is practical’. Sometimes they would beautify it with lights or something, but I could see from the entries, even though we set out an invitation to be judged for ‘Beauty Matters’, how some were mocking the idea.”

Reisner’s not surprised; she’s realistic about what she can achieve. “It’s still very, very difficult,” she shrugs. “I think my ambition is just to start stirring things.” Alsop’s a good reference for that. If Peckham Library weren’t enough, his interview in Reisner’s book made his opinion clear: “The only thing we have is our individuality. That’s what we have to give to the world.”

Of course, it’s one thing to profess that as an architect or a curator, and quite another to do so as a judge. Not that Förster would mind if some members of the ABB LEAF Awards panel were to passionately argue over a particular building’s aesthetic achievement. “It’s going to be exciting,” she thrills, as Reisner considers the “grumbling” her views might prompt over a particular building’s aesthetic.

When he was asked by Reisner to look forward, it’s clear Alsop felt something similar. “Technology’s impact is that it makes it possible to design anything,” he told her. “It’s only a question of budget.” Words rise and fall, but as they continue to play out across studios, laboratories and judging panels, the negotiations between aesthetics and function don’t get any less exhilarating.

The ABB LEAF Awards will take place on 24 October 2019 at the Berlin Mariott, Germany.