



A CALL FOR NEW AESTHETICS

SOLVING THE COORDINATION PROBLEM OF ARCHITECTURAL BEAUTY

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Proposal 1: Solving the Coordination Problem of Architectural Beauty

Summary

You've asked us to imagine what the new aesthetic of our age could be, the new Bauhaus.

I argue that we already know how to design and make beautiful buildings, we just have too few of them. To make the world more beautiful, we need to solve challenges of coordination and integration, not imagination. I am an economist and an architect and well suited to solve this coordination problem and make the world more beautiful. I'm applying for a grant to give my startup studio, Bleecker Street Projects, one year of runway to develop a design and find a client who is bold and ambitious enough to make it a reality.

- We can all point to buildings that we think are beautiful – there just aren't enough of them.
- Authors like Samuel Hughes, Brian Potter, and Scott Alexander have written extensively on this subject. They agree that what we lack in modern architecture is the use of intrinsically beautiful materials; a sense of proportion and hierarchy; thickness and façade depth; and detail and ornament. These are the qualities most people like in old buildings.
- The reason we don't pursue these qualities is because society doesn't appear to value them enough to pay the requisite beauty premium. For reasons I will attempt to address later, the ascendance of the glass-and-aluminum curtain wall system has been adopted as the market standard, and industries attached to "older" tenants of beauty - for instance, casting factories or milling workshops - have been allowed to wither. Hence, working outside the standard solution grows riskier and more expensive with every passing year.
- The good news is that a new generation of entrepreneurs are using new technologies to "supercharge" some of these older industries to decrease costs, like Monumental Labs in stone fabrication, MX3D in large-scale metal printing, or FBR and Monumental in masonry assembly.
- These companies should allow us to reincorporate beautiful materials, bespoke articulation, and general intricacy at a cost that is more competitive with the generic buildings of today.
- We know what nice buildings look like. We have the tools to make them cost-competitively. The reason we don't have a lot of these buildings yet is a failure of *coordination*.
- We need to integrate ideas and tools from various disciplines - architecture, engineering, economics, technology – in a design and construction industry that is very siloed and risk-averse. You need someone to work across silos, and, to use the modern parlance, "just do things."
- I am uniquely well suited for the task. I'm an economist by training and also an architect. I believe that I can make beautiful buildings, and using these new technologies, do it at a cost that is competitive. And I can do this work end-to-end – I can design the building, do the financial planning and cost work, and be the interface with these new technologies and startups. I can be this integration layer and deliver a complete project.
- I need a client who is bold enough to take the financial risk to build a building using these new technologies – someone who can be a patron of this new era in the same way that, for instance, the electrical company AEG was for the Bauhaus.
- I need a grant of \$50,000 to give my startup architecture studio Bleecker Street Projects one year of runway to find the right client and develop an integrated façade system that is cost-competitive with today's best façade systems. Even more important than the grant money, however, is the visibility and access that your networks would provide as a grant awardee.
- At the back of this proposal I've made a short design study of an office building in NYC that uses different fabrication techniques. These could just as easily be applied to other buildings like vacation homes in Malibu or the Hamptons, a hotel in Sonoma, or a university building in Boston. I believe these new fabrication techniques can turn these renderings into real buildings at a cost that is competitive with the equivalent buildings we make today.

We know what makes buildings beautiful

Architectural beauty has certain tenants – material depth, texture, proportion, rhythm, symmetry, and ornament – that have been replicated across cultures and time.

Samuel Hughes has written about beauty in buildings at length. He argues that buildings need a sense of proportion and hierarchy that complies with our intuition – i.e. a base, a middle, and a top which matches our expectations of weight, support, and balance. The flat facades of today erase proportion by removing depth, collapsing three-dimensional structures into a single plane with no shadow, hierarchy, or structural expression. With everything flush and uniform, nothing can be proportioned relative to anything else, leading to bland and strangely scaled buildings that do not relate to human scale. Ornament supports these hierarchies and sense of scale and also lends a level of perceived care, skill, and detail that is intuitively felt by the inhabitant. Scott Alexander also points to the apparent real preferences of most people for traditional aesthetics – of ornament, proportion, and human scale¹ - and Brian Potter has referenced the lack of these qualities in modern buildings, attributing it to today's building economics and risk-managed atmosphere.

The reason we don't have beautiful buildings is risk

Historically, techniques that made ordinary buildings beautiful – brick masonry, carved stone, deep facades, bespoke articulation – were economically viable because they were aided in some cases by the relatively low cost of labor and increasingly by technological advances in the mechanization of ornament.² Competitive advances in the post-war period such as expanded aluminum production and the development of float glass provided an alternate cost-competitive path to making facades that both complied with a fundamentally new aesthetic style (i.e. Modernism) and supported the goals of an increasingly important force in twentieth century building – the Developer.³

Developers are an actor particularly attuned to the price sensitivities of the public. Replacing beautifully ornate, deep facades with a flat aluminum or plastic curtain wall didn't appear to impact the demand for buildings enough to merit the additional effort. Many people in fact like the results of a glass curtain wall on the interior of the building – more glass, more light, more views. As a result, the flat curtain wall has become the industry standard with little resistance – they are highly insurable, performance-tested, and knowable to most architects and general contractors. At the same time, industries that existed to support the production of alternate facades (i.e. cast ornament or stone planing factories, wood milling workshops, etc) were left in the dust. Today, many people do not even know how to work with or integrate these older forms of building facades, and the options of available manufacturers are extremely limited. The result is an increasing gulf in both price but most especially risk that few are willing to take on for the sake of beauty bonus points:

- A basic aluminum curtain wall costs between \$25-\$75/sf
- A high-end performance façade that incorporates bespoke forms, stone or terra cotta, and specialized fabrication and testing can cost up to \$400-\$500/sf

The widening differential is especially challenging since the costs of construction are borne upfront, but the benefits are relatively diffuse and delayed.

New technologies bring down the cost

Recent advances in robotics, computation, and digital fabrication materially change this equation. Robotic stone carving, multi-axis additive manufacturing, robotic masonry assembly, and engineered material systems can reduce costs by orders of magnitude while increasing architectural freedom. In theory, these technologies make expressive facades in premium materials cost-competitive with today's best façade systems. In practice, they remain largely unused. I believe that with these technologies, we can make envelopes as beautiful as the facades that cost \$500/sf, but at a cost that is competitive with a more common "good-but-not-crazy" performance façade – maybe \$150-200/sf.

¹ Scott Alexander, "Whither Tartaria?", *Astral Codex Ten*, accessed January 9, 2026, <https://www.astralcodexten.com/p/whither-tartaria>

² Samuel Hughes, "The Beauty of Concrete," *Works in Progress*, accessed February 7, 2026, <https://worksinprogress.co/issue/the-beauty-of-concrete>

³ Brian Potter, "Why Skyscrapers Became Glass Boxes," *Construction Physics*, accessed January 9, 2026, <https://www.construction-physics.com/p/why-skyscrapers-became-glass-boxes>

The last challenge is one of coordination

The challenge isn't one of technological readiness but a lack of integration.

Fabrication startups do not control design decisions, façade budgets, or project risk.

Architects do not have enough money from their service fees to execute their own R&D (this is why we're still using AutoCAD, developed in 1982). In fact, many of my former bosses still sketch with pen and paper. The top design offices are very focused on design and are not focused on the economy of projects. Business in general is not a strength of the industry.

And developers lack the incentives and organizational structure to absorb early adoption risk. No developer wants to be the first one to try something!

You need someone who can reach across disciplines – who can make a beautiful design, leverage new technology to make the math work, and coordinate the engineers and specialists to test and execute these assemblies – to be the single point of responsibility for the project.

I am uniquely well suited to bring down the cost of beauty. I am trained both as an architect and as an economist:

- I've spent the last 10 years working at leading architectural offices (OMA, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, REX) designing bespoke and complex façades and building systems. Additionally, I have extensive experience in conceptual design leading international competitions entries for these offices.
- I maintain close professional relationships with world-class façade engineers and structural engineers.
- In addition to my architecture degrees, I hold an undergraduate degree in Economics from Columbia University, where I received the Economics Thesis Prize and was awarded the Morgan Stanley Women's Institutional Equity Fellowship.
- I have a huge personal interest in these tools and making beautiful facades and buildings.

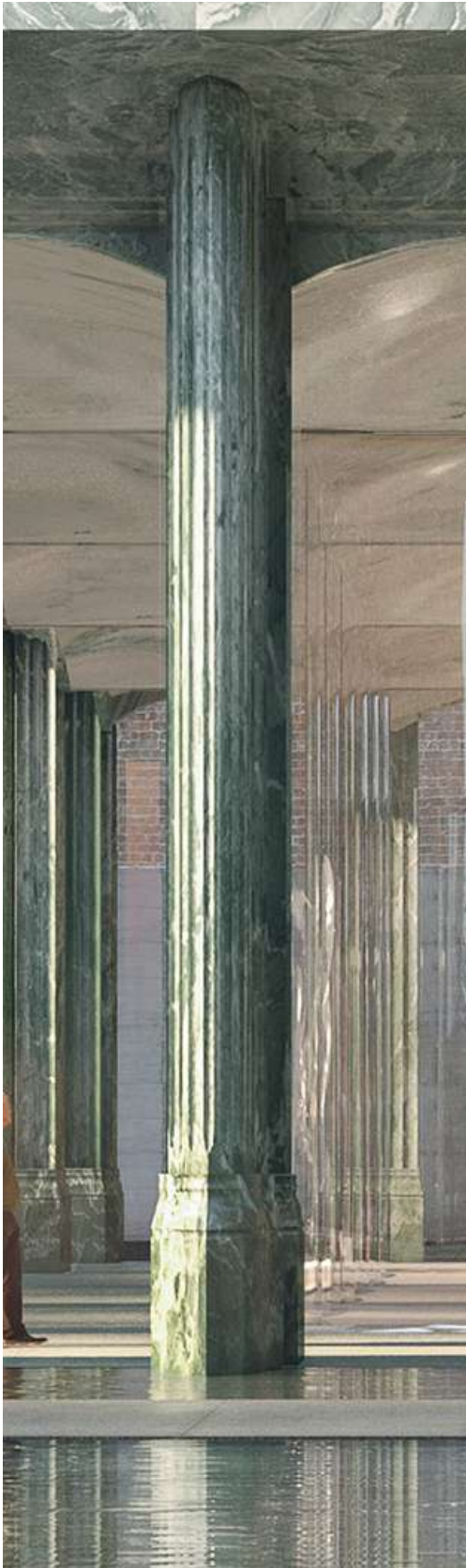
I have the skills and experience to be the missing integration layer between emerging fabrication technologies and real buildings. As a project manager for this new era, I would synthesize conceptual ideas, materials, and fabrication techniques to take a pilot project from start to finish, designing a fully developed façade system and building design that uses robotic fabrication with detailed cost, risk, and schedule tracking to compare it to today's best façade products.

I need just one client with a bold vision

Before you have widespread adoption, you need early adopters – much like AEG, the German electric conglomerate that served as the proving ground for Peter Behrens and the early Bauhaus framework. An important part of this grant would be finding this individual or company. Developers are risk adverse – I need to find someone who appreciates beauty, has a bold vision, and has the financial wherewithal and risk tolerance to bring a project like this into being.

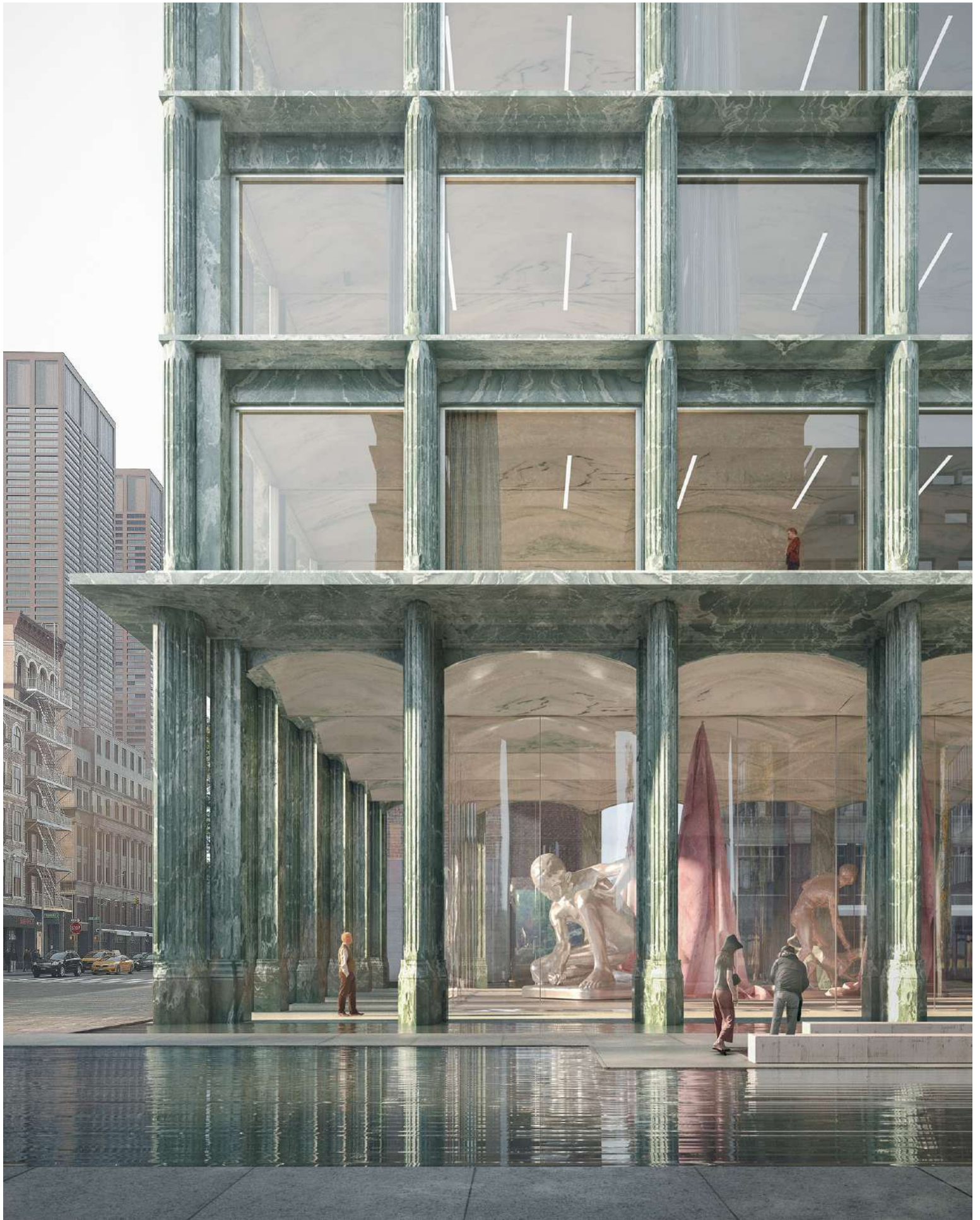
Architectural innovation has historically flowed top-down. I plan to approach this problem starting from the top down: projects where uniqueness is still valued and where differentiation already carries pricing power – i.e. Class A office buildings in New York; hotels in Malibu; or houses in the Hamptons. This aligns well with my experience working on custom, high profile cultural, commercial, and high-end residential projects.

That said, success here creates templates, supply chains, and confidence that can later diffuse downwards. If materially expressive facades can be delivered at cost and risk parity with today's premium systems, markets will supply more beauty than they currently do. Just as Tesla started with the Roadster and then built on that success by moving down-market, I would hope that the techniques I develop would over time lead to broad adoption and help make the world a more beautiful place. The goal of my grant proposal is to give my startup studio enough runway to find a client to build our prototype Roadster.



An Office Building Three Ways

I made this short design charrette to illustrate how new fabrication techniques unlock simple material and ornamental improvements that elevate the appearance of our buildings.



Office Building in Marble

Robotically-carved marble cladding is integrated into a modern curtain wall system



Office Building in Marble

A clear vertical hierarchy and regular facade interval provide continuity and structure while unique materiality and ornament provide visual interest



Office Building in Metal

3D-printed metal cladding integrated into a modern curtain wall system



Office Building in Metal

A printed metal facade could also embed the structure where necessary. This eliminates the need for two separate systems and frees up space on the interior.



Office Building in Wood

Robotically-carved wood cladding integrated into a modern curtain wall system



Office Building in Wood

The depth of the facade, subtle material variation and warmth, and ornamental articulation allow for a rational, modern building to retain a simple beauty.



Ornament and Detail

Ornamental detail at the human scale restores depth, texture, and the perception of care - elements that make buildings beautiful. Employing contemporary fabrication techniques makes this richness economically accessible again.



Britt Johnson

I am an architect based in New York City. My work has primarily focused on international competitions and concept/schematic design for large cultural and commercial projects such as museums, concert halls, university buildings, and towers. I also have construction administration experience with luxury single-family and multi-family residential. I complete private work as Bleecker Street Projects.

- Bleecker Street Projects (2022 – present): NoHo Loft Renovation (New York)
- Henning Larsen (2022 – present): 395 Third Street Office Tower (San Francisco); Goldman Sachs Headquarters Buildings (Dallas); Brooklyn Botanic Garden Masterplan; Saudi Society Museum (Riyadh)
- REX (2020-2022): Elizabeth Quay Office Towers (Perth), Shenzhen Opera House, Komische Oper Expansion (Berlin), Necklace Residence (Long Island)
- Diller Scofidio + Renfro (2018 – 2020): Centre for Civilizations, Cultures and Cities (Toronto); PRD Montparnasse (Paris); Hungary Museum of Transport (Budapest)
- Space Group (2016 – 2018): Oslo Central Station, Ruten Park (Sandnes, Norway), Fjordporten Hotel (Oslo), Stenersen Museum Renovation (Oslo)
- OMA (2014): Park Grove residential towers (Miami), Lucas Cultural Arts Museum (Chicago)

I was educated in both Architecture and Economics:

- Columbia University, Barnard College – Bachelor of Arts (2011)
Architecture, Honors with Distinction
Economics, Honors with Distinction
- Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (2016)
Master of Architecture

I am originally from Wisconsin; spent part of my childhood in Sydney, Australia; lived for a period in Norway; but am otherwise a long-time New Yorker.

I am always looking to work with forward-thinking collaborators, fabricators, designers, and entrepreneurs. Please email or call me if you'd like to talk:

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