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## THE POTENTIAL OF DESIGN AESTHETICS

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper is a contribution to building a research discourse and methodology across disciplines. Taking design aesthetics as our theme, we present and discuss a research framework with roots in the interest in aesthetics within the humanities but aimed at producing research perspectives across design practice, the humanities and the social sciences. The initial research question is a meta-question contesting the relevance of the concept of design aesthetics in design research in terms of the interest in practice methodology within design practice, the interest in understanding the object within the humanities and the interest within the social sciences in investigating patterns and aspects of consumption. The research frame is guided by two aims: (i) to enable specific research interests by looking at possible combinations of empirical material and phenomena (processes, objects, contexts) and speculative settings of employed concepts, and (ii) to investigate the methodological setting of how the research frame may be engaged in an overall framework of aesthetics while the participants simultaneously operate with the particular interests of their disciplines. After a presentation of the concept of design aesthetics, we discuss the methodological and theoretical setting of the framework and its visualization in a model and present two projects which in different ways engage and explore design aesthetics: (i) the role of tactile sensing in textile design in relation to the articulation of aesthetic qualities for both designers and consumers and (ii) a critical-analytical project investigating different levels of aesthetics in design and the role of their specific cultural setting.*

*Keywords: Design aesthetics, the humanities, design practice, research methodology*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

To enter into an investigation of design aesthetics means asking questions about the creation of value in design in several arenas. As a philosophical discipline and, beyond the strict philosophical discipline, as an entrance to understanding the production and articulation of meaning, aesthetics has its roots in the humanities, but its framework of questions can be raised in contexts of design practice, in theoretical investigations of the meaning potential and ontology of the actual design objects or solutions, and in the context of consumer preferences. Thus, the investigation of a specific *design aesthetics* calls for a multidisciplinary framework that combines and reflects a variety of theoretical discourses.

In this paper, we present and discuss a research framework to investigate aesthetics in design across design practice, the humanities and the social sciences. Contributors to the framework are researchers from design practice,

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the humanities, social sciences and engineering, each contributing with their own research methodology while also engaging in a process of cross-fertilization across the different approaches.

The paper proceeds in three steps. First, we present and discuss the concept of design aesthetics, that is, the approach aimed at conceptualizing aesthetics in relation to design. Second, we present our research framework and our attempts to frame and operationalize the initial research meta-question contesting the relevance of the concept of design aesthetics in design research. This we intend to do in terms of the interest in methodology within design practice, the interest in understanding the concrete design object in the humanities, and the interest within the social sciences in investigating patterns and aspects of consumption. On this point, the project may take its conceptual starting point in the field of the humanities as the basis for aesthetic reflection, but the aim has been to broaden the discussion to include the field of design practice and the social sciences. We discuss the methodological and theoretical setting of the framework. Third, we present two projects that in engage with and explore design aesthetics within practice, object analysis and the role of commercial settings in the creation of the consumer's aesthetic preferences.

## **2 DESIGN AESTHETICS**

In this section we present and discuss the concept of design aesthetics. As a structured conceptualization of aesthetics in relation to design, design aesthetics is a relatively new branch of design theory and research, although there have been some early attempts (Pye 1978). The discussion of the role of aesthetics in design is based on two paradoxes: The concept of aesthetics is integrated into the common discourse on design, often as a taken-for-granted aspect of design, although what is meant by aesthetics in this context is rarely clarified.

Next, there is a strong philosophical tradition for discussing aesthetics especially in relation to art but rarely in relation to design. In its affiliation with philosophy, the theoretical perspective on aesthetics is part of a tradition in the humanities that goes along with an interest in a diversity of aesthetic media active in producing, articulating and communicating meaning on different levels and in different kinds of complexity. For example, an interest in the 'aesthetic function' as a way for language to reflect its own constitution as a producer of meaning that does not point beyond itself to a 'message' has been formulated in the context of linguistics, e.g. in the 1930s in by Jan Mukařovský from the so-called Prague School of Aesthetics (Mukarovsky 1979).

Although aesthetics in design has been a neglected area of research, attempts have been made across disciplines to conceptualize the specific field of 'design aesthetics'. Roughly speaking, these attempts take their starting point either within the field of design, often in issues of design practice, or in the philosophical understanding of aesthetics.

In relation to the field of design, a dominant concern has been to understand the aesthetic qualities of the nonfunctional, emotionally appealing factors in design and how they affect the process of designing. With a number of approaches seeking to make emotions applicable in design practice (Jordan 2000; Norman 2004; Hekkert 2006; Desmet and Hekkert 2007; Hekkert & Leder 2007; Desmet 2010), the interest in emotions has contributed to setting the agenda for research into the sensual-cognitive aesthetic impact of design. In a paradigmatic

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expression, Sabine Döring states how the aesthetic is connected to the emotional, since 'to experience something aesthetically is to give it emotional value' (2000, p. 67). The focus on the connection between aesthetics and emotion can be criticized for only representing one element in the repertoire of aesthetic means, as testified by the tradition of philosophical aesthetics and general aesthetic theory that addresses aesthetics foremost as a matter of intricate, often complex communication of meaning in artistically created forms (e.g. Adorno 1970, Bubner 1989, Menke 2013).

In its focus on understanding meaning formation in human creations, the philosophical interest in the concept of aesthetics, as stated above, is embedded within the humanities. This is further evidenced by the interest in philosophical and pragmatist aesthetics within the phenomenon of art and other aesthetic phenomena (e.g. Dewey 2005, Shusterman 2000). In relation to the philosophical interest in aesthetics, the field has expanded from an interest in art and taste towards an interest in design. This is reflected in the book *The Aesthetics of Design* by Jane Forsey (2013) which aims to formulate a specific philosophical aesthetics for design, that is, how design relates to modes of experience. The trend is also reflected in a German context in the anthology *Ästhetische Werte und Design* (2010), which contains a number of essays written by philosophers. In philosophy, it makes sense to deal with design because a certain branch of philosophical aesthetics deals with the role of sensual appeal for cognition and with the prevalent aestheticization of ordinary, everyday life (Oldemeyer 2008). Beyond the specific philosophical interest in design, a culturally oriented direction of research has proposed a shift in attention towards aesthetic relations and culturally produced aesthetic categories rather than looking only at the object. This research has ventured into the field of the aesthetics of the everyday and addressed the alleged trend towards the aestheticization of all aspects of culture and society (Featherstone 1991; Ngai 2012). Aesthetics is no longer the exclusive domain of art but is also applied to our immediate, sensuous experience of the world (see e.g. Saito 2010 & Leddy 2012), even if this not always is investigated in relation to design.

On this background related to design practice and the humanities, we position our approach as a) specifically interested in design and b) informed by several approaches to aesthetics. By the term 'design aesthetics' we aim at an overall conceptualization of the role of aesthetics in design that is flexible in its approach, both in terms of design and notions of aesthetics, but fixed in its focus on design. We seek to investigate aesthetics in relation to design as an *entry point for understanding the creation, conception, perception, and consumption of meaning potentials and value in design in processes, objects, and contexts*. Next, we propose to build on an interpretive framework for investigating the formation and articulation of aesthetic meaning in design on three levels of meaning formulation and articulation: a sensual-phenomenological level, a conceptual-hermeneutical level, and a discursive-contextual level (Folkmann 2013), investigating sensual-tactile aspects of design in relation to experience, processes of understanding, and the role of context.

### 3 DESIGN AESTHETICS ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Following the introduction of the concept of design aesthetics, we now introduce and discuss our cross-disciplinary approach to design aesthetics. In so doing, we discuss the possibilities offered by initiating a broad research framework that

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encompasses interests within design practice, the humanities, and the social sciences. In its exploration of the character, role, and use of the concept of aesthetics, the project takes its conceptual starting point in the humanities, which has a long tradition for conceptualizing aesthetics. However, the aim is to widen the discussion to the field of design practice and social sciences and to test the concepts in settings of practical application.

The practical setting for the project is a general research framework entitled SDU Design which was initiated in 2013 as an 'initiative at SDU Kolding to enhance interdisciplinary collaboration in design research, also involving local partners' (SDU Design 2014). In the context of SDU (University of Southern Denmark), this means engaging researchers from the faculties of the humanities, the social sciences, and engineering. A main local partner is the Design School Kolding. Physically, SDU and the Design School Kolding are located next to one another. Projects within the overall framework of SDU Design do not limit themselves to aesthetically oriented projects; other projects have had or have their focus on textile design, learning spaces, small creative enterprises, and digital books.

The SDU Design project on design aesthetics was initiated in January 2014 with an initial meta-research question that was not aimed at producing specific findings here and now but rather at exploring an open-ended question about the relevance of aesthetics in relation to design: How can an aesthetics of design be employed to understand, develop, and challenge the potentials of meaning and communication in design in relation to the process, object, and context of use/consumption?

In this formulation, several understandings of aesthetics are tentatively implied: First, aesthetics is regarded in a non-essentialist and functional manner, as a matter of meaning and communication. In its functional-communicative approach to aesthetics, the project framework does not adhere to one specific model of aesthetics, e.g. viewing aesthetics as exclusively related to aspects of sensual appeal, the question of appearance (Seel 2000) or 'ambience' (Böhme 2001) or as a question of specific communicative spheres of the medium in question, in this line of thought typically art. Neither does it attempt to create 'a universal model of aesthetics' as in the Dutch project UMA (UMA 2014) but focuses specifically on design.

Second, the communicative element of aesthetics is seen to evolve in relation to phases in and of design. Thus, the project has a reflexive aim of questioning both how aesthetics can be engaged in different moments of design and, conversely, shedding light back on different possible conceptions applicable to the project setting. In the phases of the design process, the aesthetic meaning content may be difficult to detect and describe, but it should nevertheless be searched for and investigated. Within this approach to exploring the role of aesthetics in design, it remains open to contestation how the focus on different levels of meaning production and articulation that the focus on aesthetics brings with it can be an asset for making the design more innovative; it is a basic assumption that the project is first of all to be descriptive and open-minded about the possible outcome of engaging aesthetics in a broad framework.

Third, the project builds on the assumption that aesthetics has been insufficiently theorized in some of the phases of the design process, especially regarding its role in design practice in relation to methods: In much design methods literature, aesthetics is regarded as a matter of superficial finishing, unrelated to the more 'serious' matters of formulating the dialectics of problem

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and solution (e.g. Lawson 2005, Cross 2007). Or, to be more precise, of the different traditions within design practice, the ones rooted in engineering and technical design may have this focus, whereas the traditions within design that are focused on artistic creation and material-based design/craft may have a deeper interest in aesthetics.

Next, the concept of aesthetics as *relational* is of importance: Aesthetic meaning is never given per se but evolves in a coded, interpretive relationship between intention, designed meaning, and apprehension by someone. In theories of aesthetics, the relational is often described in terms of a dynamic relationship of a subject with an intention to see and perceive something as aesthetic and an object with certain aesthetically coded features (e.g. Genette 1999). That is, to define aesthetics is to describe a functional relationship between the subject's intentional viewing and desire to perceive aesthetically and an aesthetic coding of the objects, their 'intentional aesthetic function' (Genette 1999, p. 2). Thus, the act of defining constructs the aesthetic at the precise intersection of these two aspects.

Also, the German philosopher Wolfgang Iser (2003) speaks of the aesthetic as a functional movement of play between polarities, e.g. subject-object, where the aesthetic meaning should not be confounded with the final product of this movement; instead, it resides in the middle. Looking at design, the relational conception of the aesthetic must be expanded to include understandings of the whole cultural-contextual circuit of design (e.g. Fry 1988, Julier 2014). This makes it clear that the relational element in design describes a larger network of meaning at the intersection of design practice, production, mediation, and consumption. The aesthetic in design is articulated within these parameters of an overall design culture.

In sum, the project investigates the formation and articulation of aesthetic meaning within a larger framework of a contextual understanding of the formative factors in the circuit of design. Thus, it is methodologically possible to enter the circuit at different points.

In working with the project, we developed a model aimed at describing different entry points to working with aesthetics within the larger framework of the circuit of design (Figure 1). The linearity of the model drawing does not imply a simple linear communication model; rather, it first points out different aspects in design to look at and, second, emphasizes the designed object as an entry point for analysis.

The model designates a relationship between different aspects (practice, object, use/consumption) while also placing the design object in the middle as a transmission point for meaning articulation. Hereby, the humanist interest in the object and its meaning properties gains in importance, as an analysis of the design object and its meaning properties (on the sensual-phenomenological, conceptual-hermeneutical and discursive-contextual level) makes it possible to investigate the aesthetic parameters that both condition the becoming of design objects in design practice and set the frame for consumption patterns, for example in designed environments for consumption, such as shopping malls and brand spaces.

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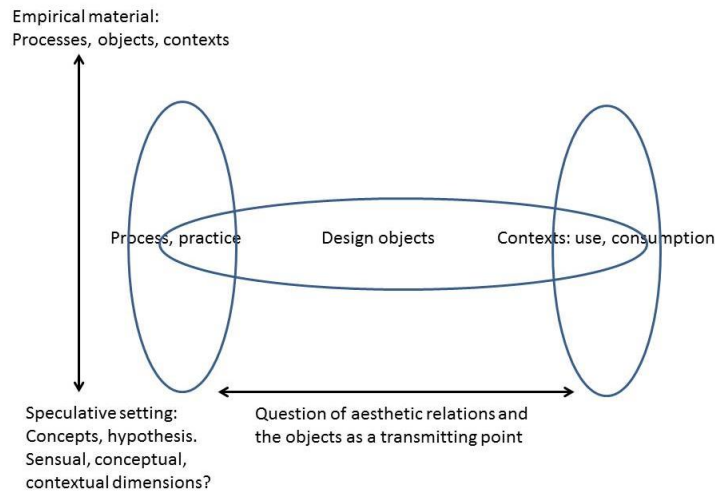


Figure 1 – Model of research settings in relation to design aesthetics.

The research framework is guided by two aims: 1) to facilitate specific research interests by looking at possible combinations of empirical material, phenomena (processes, objects, contexts), and speculative settings of employed concepts, and 2) to investigate the methodological setting of how the research framework may engage with an overall framework of aesthetics while the participants simultaneously pursue the special interests of their disciplines. Thus, the model encourages the formulation of specific research questions in the combination of empirical material and speculative settings that may vary with specific research approaches and traditions (studies in design methods, semiotics and semantics of the object, and consumer studies). At the same time, as mentioned, the framework positions the design object as a privileged entry point of investigation where aesthetic parameters can be detected and, from this starting point, related to practice and contexts of use and consumption. Thus, the framework is open to a variety of interests in combining aesthetics and different phases or aspects of design. At the same time, it attempts to offer an interpretive framework for investigating the formation and articulation of aesthetic meaning in design through the focus on the design object. From the object, we can point *back* to practice as the phase of creation and *forward* to consumption in the question of how design objects relate to modes of experience, engage processes of understanding, and affect their context.

#### 4 INVESTIGATING DESIGN AESTHETICS

In the following we describe two projects within the framework where we have been engaged as researchers: One is a practice-based project that investigates the role of tactile sensing, as consumers offer feedback to the process of designing. In its practice focus, this study is situated in the first third of Figure 1. The other is a critical-analytical project that investigates different levels of aesthetics in design and the role of their specific cultural setting, beginning in the middle of the figure but also reaching out to the last third in its exploration of the role of the context.

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### **4.1 THE ROLE OF TACTILE SENSING IN TEXTILE DESIGN IN RELATION TO ARTICULATING AESTHETIC QUALITIES AND PREFERENCES**

In this project, we looked at the aesthetic experience of tactile sensibility as a means of creating increased awareness of the material quality of textiles and garments in order to obtain a more sustainable relation to clothes (Bang & Riisberg 2014). The claim was that becoming more aware of garment fit and the material quality of textiles could a) enhance the users' ability to judge and appreciate the aesthetic value of garments, which b) could inform designers about how to design for this appreciation. If the user is able to make more secure choices in the purchase situation the result might be enhanced satisfaction in the use phase and thus establish emotional attachment. According to literature, all these parameters are essential conditions for slowing down fashion, reducing the environmental impact of production, and saving resources (Allwood et al. 2006, Fletcher 2008, Fletcher & Grose 2012, Klepp 2001, Niinimäki & Koskinen 2011).

The aim of the research was to develop new dialogue tools for teaching fashion and textile students with the ultimate goal of creating value by stimulating new ways of thinking and engaging with users. The long-term aim was to develop alternative transformational strategies that may promote the design of products and services for a more sustainable future.



*Figure 2: Graphically reworked representation of the experiment with tactile sensing of textiles. Image credits: Laura Locher and Alina Breuil Moat.*

A central part of the project, called *Awareness*, aimed at contesting the dominance of visual experiences in our culture and investigating the tactile sensibility, which is often non-verbal and hence remains tacit. Upper secondary school students (grades 10-12) were invited to take part in a series of experiments, e.g. verbalizing tactile qualities while being blindfolded (Figure 2). The intention with this experiment was to create experiences that were not part of a commercial context, but still drew on previous experiences with textiles and clothing. In the experiments, the participants' initial lack of tactile sensibility was used as a 'gateway' for staging an aesthetic experience: Precisely because many users are not conscious about the tactile aspects, such an approach seems to be able to enhance the experience and serve to further the participant's reflection and discursive engagement.

The studies presented methods for conscious reflection and verbalization of areas of textile design that are often considered part of the 'tacit knowledge' of the design discipline. Through the methods, both textile and fashion designers



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can acquire more conscious reflection in the design process, benefiting from user involvement to gain access to a dialogue that involves various user groups and taps into their insights and competencies. Further, this experience of interacting in a staged situation could offer an alternative way to offer user information/education, which might support more reflective choices in the shopping situation and thus encourage more sustainable behaviour. Central to the experiment is its facilitation by engaging the aesthetic discourse in relation to the tactile sensing of the concrete textiles, that is, of the design object.

#### 4.2 AESTHETICS IN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF AESTHETICIZATION

In the second project, the aim was to apply the interpretive framework to investigate the formation and articulation of aesthetic meaning in design on a sensual-phenomenological level, a conceptual-hermeneutical level, and a contextual-discursive level and to discuss this meaning in the context of the cultural framing of design (Folkmann & Jensen 2014). The purpose was to engage in a critical reflection on the impact of the cultural framing of design and to focus at the cultural and contextual element of aestheticization, that is, the procedures by which design objects are not only regarded as aesthetic in themselves but also attributed meaning as aesthetic by external factors, e.g. in mediation. In this perspective, the question of aesthetics in design is also a question of how a domain of 'aesthetic' meaning is strategically related to the design object by factors that are external to the concrete objects themselves. This leads into a discussion of the cultural factors surrounding and circumscribing design. Thus, the question is how design is regarded and positioned as aesthetic, that is, constructed as 'aesthetic'.

In this investigation, aesthetics is reflected in light of cultural theory and approaches to a cultural analysis of design that aims to describe design analytically in its relationship and dialogue with its formative contexts. These have been described in different but nevertheless coherent ways, as e.g. (i) contexts of production, mediation, and consumption, as proposed by Dick Hebdige (1994) and Tony Fry (1988), as (ii) an entire 'circuit of culture' of production, consumption, representation, identity, and regulation, each affecting each other and all contributing to the overall production of cultural meaning (du Gay et al. 1997), or (iii) under the label of 'Design Culture', as 'the study of how design functions in all its manifestations economically, politically, socially and culturally' (Julier 2013) within the framework of production, designer, and consumption (Julier 2014). In this latter perspective, each of the formative contexts of production, designer, and consumption contributes to defining how the actual design object might be understood in terms of its meaning. Beside the properties of the design object, the analyst also has to look for the cultural construction of design as aesthetic, that is, of design as something that is attributed and imbued with a kind of meaning that may be labelled 'aesthetic'. Designers, manufacturers, retailers, design magazines, blogs, etc. – all the actors in the cultural circuit of design – may employ the term 'aesthetic' in relation to the design object and install a notion that the object in fact may be regarded as aesthetic.

One aim of this investigation is to propose a methodology of description that may be used to describe what the aesthetic is, and how it relates to its cultural framings. Our research has not yet achieved that, but we are working our way through a thorough analysis of design objects, which will hopefully inform a methodology. As a paradigmatic example, we have worked with the Caravaggio pendant lamp (Figure 3), which was designed in 2005 by the Danish designer

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Cecilie Manz, and which is manufactured and marketed by the Danish lighting company Lightyears A/S. We examined how the lamp is being positioned as aesthetic by means of coding in relation to sensual appeal, framing of understanding, and cultural impact, that is, the way in which the lamp's aesthetic potential may reflectively and strategically be taken in different directions. In the case of the Caravaggio lamp, there is an immanent meaning potential in the way the lamp reflects its own meaning that relates it to conceptual design, such as the Dutch Droog Design.



Figure 3: Caravaggio pendant. Designer: Cecilie Manz.

Further, processes of mediation play a huge role in how the lamp is staged and perceived as either 'design' or 'art', how it evokes an effect of existing in time/being a contemporary design while also transcending time, how it appears raw and modern yet also pre-industrial and rural, etc. (Figure 4). The mediations create a frame around the design that articulates it as a simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary object, aestheticizing it as a dual object.

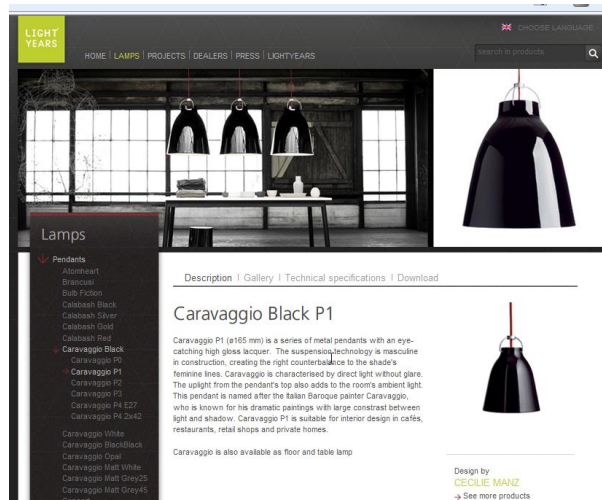


Figure 4. Screen dumps from Lightyears.dk

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In this approach, we examine the aesthetic as a meaning potential in objects, the mechanisms by which the design object becomes an object of consumption, and the role of commercial settings in creating the consumer's aesthetic preferences.

### **5 CONCLUSION**

We see promising perspectives in our explorative framework of engaging with aesthetics in design. In our immediate setting of SDU Design, projects aimed at investigating consumer preferences and designers' language for discussing aesthetics are evolving. At the Kolding Design School, the development of dialogue tools for engaging users and design students through aesthetic experiences points at new ways of integrating theory and practice.

For now, we wish to stress the productive potential in looking at aesthetics in both abstract and concrete terms, in both the unlimited sense of formative meaning contexts of design and the close focus on actual, concrete, analyzable design objects. Deriving from the field of the humanities, the discipline of aesthetics has, in addition to its philosophical roots, a distinct focus on different aspects of *meaning*: how meaning is produced, articulated, communicated, and, ultimately, embedded in different contexts.

Aesthetic theory offers *specific* insights into the sensual appeal of objects, the coded features of objects in relation to how they are met and subsequently understood, and the cultural process of aestheticization that creates mediated frames for apprehending something as 'aesthetic'. As we see it, the next step in exploring the potential of design aesthetics now is to examine and exploring how these insights can become a productive asset in all the phases of designing – from the early conceptualizations in the design process, where design objects are open and changeable, to the commercial conditions on the market, with its fixed objects and dynamic, transformative media contexts.

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