



Design Aesthetics

Theoretical Basics and Studies in Implication

Mads Nygaard Folkmann

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To my family—Lea, Ane, and Lone

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Preface

This book's ambition is to advance the understanding of what design is and means as part of the modern world. Underlying the academic pursuit is my deep personal interest in understanding what the "world" is for us and the specific ways, in the here and now, that we are part of and at the same time contribute to shaping this world. This is, for me, why design is so important and interesting to investigate.

In the last 30 years, design has become a highly reflected concept for human creation, and it has increasingly been put to cultural, societal, economic, and political agendas. The range and variety of what design covers in products, graphics, digital interfaces, service solutions, systems, and social design have created whole cultures of design as a noncircumventable condition for human lives. Thus, design is getting ever more important and omnipresent in today's societies, and reversely, they are difficult to imagine without design.

Because of the process of modernization, design has changed the face and character of our material surroundings and, accordingly, the experiential setting for our being in the world. In this way, design has gained in impact quantitatively by being everywhere and qualitatively by the ways it enters and conditions human lives. On this point, a special interest for me is how the advent of digital technology has changed what design is, and how it appears, when it is anchored in objects but turns "post-material."

As a product of human creation, design produces an artificial interface for meeting the world. On this basis, the argument of the book is twofold.

First, design should be interpreted in the context of phenomenological reflection as it frames our experiential engagement with the world. Design may not be identical with the world (rather, it is only a part of the world),

but it creates access to what we understand as “world.” As pointed out by philosopher Wolfgang Iser (1978), what is perceived as real is “no longer a privilege of reality but has been absorbed by media and design” (129). Thus, the phenomenological argument is that design frames human experience.

Next, aesthetics provides concepts for reflecting how this framing of experience takes place. On this point, I propose to differentiate between sensual, conceptual, and contextual dimensions of aesthetics in articulating what is specific for an aesthetics of design or, more specifically, for what I will label “design aesthetics.” Along sensual, conceptual, and contextual dimensions of design aesthetics, this book investigates how design stages and focuses “experience” and how this is negotiated in design practice, through design objects, and in consumer perception.

The book unfolds design aesthetics in its theory and practical implication and presents itself as a contribution to aesthetic theory. It is, however, even more so an attempt to engage in a discussion on design as a phenomenon setting the scene for our being in the modern world. On this point, the book implicitly addresses the question of what makes design special and how it has changed in history. Thus, on the one hand, to enter an aesthetic reflection entails general reflections of sensory experience and the coding of objects. On the other hand, design has always been a child of its time and embedded in historical and cultural contextualization. The book takes a material starting point in looking at physical objects—in this way, the reader will meet several lamps and portable loudspeakers—and a next step beyond this book could be to investigate other manifestations of design in the light of aesthetics.

My previous book for the MIT Press, *The Aesthetics of Imagination in Design* (Folkmann 2013), also dealt with aesthetics, but as a starting point for a more narrowly focused study on the role of imagination for design. Even though chapters in the two books are related, and chapter 3 in this book builds on insights of chapter 3 from the previous book, the focus now is broadening the scope of what aesthetics is and means for design. In the 2013 book, aesthetics is a vehicle for an investigation of the dynamics and processes of imagination; in this book, it is the main subject. The fact that a lot has been going on in the last 15 years in defining and exploring the aesthetics of design requires a revised look at the topic.

The book is influenced mostly by discussions in the fields of aesthetic theory and cultural studies in design. In recent years, design has increasingly

become an object for aesthetic reflection, and philosophers and design researchers alike have contributed to the discussion (see chapter 2). Building on this, my own contribution is to consider the aesthetics of design within the cultural context of design. Being affiliated with a humanities university department having design studies and design history as its core disciplines, this has been my disciplinary starting point in the endeavor to understand the aesthetics of design and to make cultural studies in design and aesthetic theory meet and cross-fertilize.

The book has a bias in cases and collaborations of a Danish provenience; being located at the University of Southern Denmark in Kolding, the Design School Kolding is a direct neighbor for sharing interests and collaborations. The book should, however, not be read as a book on Danish design or on the aesthetics of Danish design. Through the generality of concepts, I encourage readers to transfer the analytical optics to their own contexts of design.

Just as the book draws on and integrates sources from different disciplines, it draws on sources in different languages, especially German, where a kind of explosion in theoretical discourse on design has taken place in recent years. Unless explicitly noted in the text, all translations from non-English sources are mine.

The book has been in progress for several years, and parts of it have appeared in conference papers and journal articles. Different research communities have helped shaping this book. Philosophers of aesthetics, notably Jane Forsey, Carsten Friberg, and the participants at the series of philosophical seminars in Ascea, Italy, contributed to conceptual discussions. The Danish network for aesthetics, Aesthetics Unlimited, set the scene for invaluable seminars and visits, and I thank Anne Elisabeth Sejten for her generosity. I have profited from discussions and seminars at the Design Research Lab in Berlin, Germany. Fátima Pombo, Kjetil Fallan, Grace Lees-Maffei, and Nic Maffei have—as part of the international research community in design studies and design history—influenced the process and helped me frame the project. Danish design researchers Vibeke Riisberg and Anne Louise Bang from Design School Kolding provided valuable insight into the world of designers; Riisberg read parts of the manuscript as well. Tom Bieling of Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach, Germany, has been a highly inspiring dialogue partner. Editorial staff at the MIT Press were invaluable in bringing the book to fruition, especially Doug Sery for his

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Introduction

To deal with design aesthetics is to contest the relevance of design for human life. From light switches and smartphones to simple items such as plates and cutlery, design frames everyday experiences and practices and constitutes the world we live in. The basic claim of this book is that aesthetics gives a central entry to understanding what design is, how design works, and how design frames and conditions human experience.

My initial assumption is that design is getting ever more important as a factor of the modern world in its many forms as material objects, graphics, interfaces, spaces, services, and mediated representations. Being ubiquitous, design sets the scene for human lives through the material objects that surround us, through the devices we use to communicate and organize information, and in the systems and structures that guide our behavior and ways of interpreting and gaining knowledge about the world. Design needs to be taken seriously as a medium, material and immaterial, visible and invisible, for meeting the world. Good or bad design can affect people on a large scale.

My core argument is that *aesthetics* provides a productive way to investigate how design frames experience. As a methodological tool, aesthetics offers concepts for investigating and understanding how design is constituted, how it appeals to and affects people, and how it sets frames for human experiencing. Concepts in aesthetics describe how design appeals to us and is experienced through the design's immediate tangible elements (e.g., form, material, color, and texture) and dimensions of functionality and use (e.g., in interaction). Further, aesthetics also relates to conceptual and contextual aspects of design.

Means of Experience

The two different drinking glasses on the cover of this book may serve as an initial illustration. In general, drinking glasses are the means of the everyday practice of handling and drinking liquids. At a microlevel of experience, thus, the manifold of drinking glasses in, for instance, appearance, size, and weight provides a variety of possible sensual and conceptual interactions. The ribbed glass from the Finnish company Iittala is an example of an industrially manufactured product that contrasts with more neutral glasses; it has a distinct appearance, builds on historical heritage by being in continuous production since 1932, and carries the name of the designer Aino Aalto. In contrast, the irregular, organically shaped, mouth-blown glass by the Danish designer Anders Raad exemplifies an experimental, uniquely crafted product that hereby bears the mark of its designer. What they have in common is that both glasses may attract attention to themselves. Whereas much design operates as silent, anonymous, non-noticeable vehicles for a purpose, this is a type of glass that through its design, is intended to stand out and be noticed.

First, the Iittala glass may offer a sensual experience of drinking where visual perception of form and color of the glass is in the foreground (and the glass is available in five colors and a clear version), perhaps evoking expectations of what it is like to drink from this glass or just appreciating the reflection of light in the glass. Next, tactile sensations—touching the rhythmic, regularly ribbed surface of the glass with one's hands and mouth—contribute to an enhanced sensual engagement. Hereby, the glass frames the experience of drinking by offering a sensual process of drinking that also attracts attention to the means of drinking, the glass, itself. Yet another enhanced experience may be offered by the organically shaped glass. Because all glasses in this series are mouth-blown and thus unique by intention, they also, as a type, offer an experience of a high degree of variety. When turned, the organically shaped glass reflects the light in ever-new ways. Because it is made of leftover glass from the production, Anders Raad never knows which color it will turn out to be (except that because of the oven temperature of 1,100 degrees Celsius, it will be in a blue-green range since these are the only colors to endure this temperature). The glass offers micro-sensations of touching all the folds and varieties of the surface; and it may encourage a conceptual reflection of why it is made so, which in

the view of the designer has to do with exploring new possibilities of glass production and recycling materials.

In the scope of this book, aesthetics relates to phenomenological concepts of how experience is enabled and structured as well as to cultural notions of what design is as a part of the modern world. In this way, as illustrated by the glass example, the aesthetics of design cannot be reduced to the visual, contemplative engagement with objects at a distance and perceived isolated from their contextual setting, which is a part of the Western art tradition and still can be found in design museums. Admittedly, this tradition may contribute to pointing at some aesthetic potential in the displayed objects; the cover image of glasses may serve as an example of how design objects can be displayed with the focus on appearance rather than use.

Instead, the phenomenological starting point brings us in close interaction with the objects and the contexts they are a part of and requires a reflection on how the design objects through form, potential for use and interaction, and meaning content provide access to and an experience of the world.

Obviously, design is not just aesthetic; it also concerns, for instance, social, political, and ethical issues, the question of sustainability, and the consideration of process. Still, the aesthetic aspect of design is always present to some degree as the way design appeals to and communicates with us in its sensual appearance. In this way, I will privilege aesthetics as an entry to understanding design, even if I will not claim it to be a comprehensible term for all aspects of design. I will claim, however, that all design has an aesthetic dimension as it relates to us and our understanding the contemporary importance of design.

The Focus on Design

The starting point for my study of design aesthetics is an interest in the material culture of everyday life and how design shapes it. Design can be said to be a *Leitmedium* of modernity, in the sense that it is an overall medium for modern cultures and creates meaning in an intersubjectively binding way (cf. Hörisch 2009). Design is the unavoidable access point for our perception and understanding of the world in its cultural formations. Art may have been a driver of cultural development until the end of the nineteenth century, at least in a Western context; in the twentieth and

twenty-first centuries, design is globally at the cultural as well as technological forefront. As mentioned by design culture researchers Guy Julier and Anders V. Munch (2019) in a statement underlining our entanglement in the designed world: “We can skip art exhibitions, avoid television and digital media, ignore advertisements and act contrarily to the schemes of architecture and planning. But design relentlessly intervenes into the quotidian world so that it becomes our world and we become in it” (5).¹

Vital for my argument, I will stress the importance of the *material* aspect of the objects of everyday life. Design gives material texture and structure to our physical surroundings in everything from utensils, furniture, smartphones, computers, and books to transportation vehicles and systems, houses and urban environments, and shopping malls and infrastructures. In terms of design, the experiential meeting with the world is, though, not just given through three-dimensional material objects but also through graphics, digital-interactive surfaces, and designs conceptually conceived as solutions at a societal level or the level of a service. I will, however, primarily pursue the physical materiality of design and foremost focus on material objects and less on processes and methods of planning and thinking, which have been included in the concept of design for the last 30 years.² I will, though, argue for the advantages of taking a material starting point because this provides focus for the discussions of what aesthetics in design is, since most existing aesthetic theories often relate to concrete artifacts. In this way, my approach will more easily connect to previous theoretical discussions. But, importantly, the material focus may take the interest in many directions. In my view, a material starting point makes it possible to explore how design has changed and now affects our lives in ways that were unimaginable only few years ago.

Especially with the development of digital technology, the materiality of design has changed. Of course, developments in technology have always influenced design and changed its materiality; just think of how the development of light sources such as the halogen light bulb and light-emitting diodes has influenced lamp design and “offered greater freedom of experiment in dematerialized form” (Aynsley 2009, 191). But digital technology has not only affected the form of the objects but also the core of their being as design objects. Objects with embedded digital technology have increasingly gained more function while being miniaturized, and on-screen interactivity has gained immensely in importance through the digital interfaces

everywhere. But even if materiality has changed, it has not disappeared. Even seemingly immaterial service design solutions also need material touch points.

Further, understanding the change of the material provides an entrance into understanding the changes happening at the larger scale of culture, economics, and politics, which, reversely, operate as a contextual framing for the material objects. In times of platform capitalism, blockchain technologies, and ubiquitous mobile computing, we are facing a “digital culture” (Stalder 2016) where cultural, economic, and political processes of creating and exchanging meaning, establishing communities, and organizing knowledge have taken on new forms. In my approach, the focus on the material objects and their aesthetics will be a way to focus an analysis of contemporary digital culture and how digital technology severely changes modern living conditions. Climate change is another transformative condition for how we conceive of design and its role in society, where design has taken and, in the future, may take the double role of being both the problem, as a driver of unnecessary consumption leading to waste production and immense emission of carbon dioxide (CO₂), and a possible solution whose character we still need to see. “The Ecological Turn” in design is still awaiting to be achieved.³ Although beyond the scope of this book, it is an arena for design aesthetics to enter to reflect how sustainability can be gained and experienced through design.

Ultimately, the aim of the book is to acknowledge the omnipresence of design in the modern world and to examine how design appeals to us. On this point, design may appear for us in a double way—not only as omnipresent in the objects of everyday life but also as something with a special mark of being “design.” Design historian Penny Sparke (2013) calls this the Janus face of design: being a “*silent quality of all mass-produced goods*” while also being “*a named concept within the mass media*” (2, her italics). Design is ordinary *and* special at the same time. Accordingly, it is experienced habitually in proximity *and* perceived in reflective distance. Likewise, the aesthetics of design balances between these two facets of design. On the one hand, it operates as a general feature of all design—that is, how it creates sensual appeal and is organized in “sensescapes,” a term used by cultural theorist Ben Highmore (2009). On the other hand, the aesthetics of design opens an appreciation of special qualities and appearances of design—for instance, when design objects are designed to call for attention. Being closely affiliated

with industrial production, design appeals to consumption through seductive surfaces, critically investigated in the 1970s as the aesthetics of the commodity (Haug 2009), and is hereby permeated by flows of economies and financialization (Julier 2017).

More precisely, this double structure of design as silently omnipresent and as object for conscious attention is a special feature of design aesthetics. Often, design solutions oscillate between these two positions of background and foreground, of the ordinary and the special.⁴ On the one hand, in breaking with the habitual, design may let us experience everyday life in new and often refracted or reflected ways. The organically shaped glass can be seen as such an object offering a new sensation and reflection of a mundane praxis. On the other hand, design is mundane, familiar, and a part of the texture of everyday life. Experiencing design may require a “special sensibility” (Drügh 2015, 132) when we perceive something so close and immediate to us that we do not notice it as special or do not notice it at all.

On the basis of this complexity, the purpose of the book is to understand the different modalities of the aesthetics of design: how design is a part of the modern world and how aesthetics may play different roles in the creation, circulation, and consumption of the artificial world of design. The critical project is not just to enlighten how design can be aesthetically effective—for instance, in being “pleasant,” which is the focus in some mostly practice-oriented theories on the aesthetics of design—but to enable a reflection of the power of design in contemporary life, for good and for bad.

The Scope of Aesthetics in Design

To take aesthetics as a starting point for dealing with design may not be entirely uncontroversial. In 2013, the German design research journal *Öffnungszeiten. Papiere zu Designwissenschaft* asked whether “the old question” of aesthetics still might be relevant in the “seemingly easy-going-ness and superficial-ness of a globalized culture” (Romero-Tejedor 2013, 3). The answer, however, was affirmative, in the sense that we need to be critical of the different kinds of aesthetics in play and with relevance for design (cf. Allesch 2013).

In this vein, over several years (2014, 2016, 2018) conferences of the International Committee for Design History and Design Studies have proposed strands on design aesthetics in order to investigate how it contributes

to “*transforming ways of living and constructing new paradigms*” (Calvera 2018, 538, her italics), an important and difficult task. In 2020, the aesthetics of design was foregrounded in a conference “Ästhetik des Designs: Philosophische Perspektiven,” organized by the growing humanistic design research community in Germany, which questioned how design as a “descendant of industrialization,” on the one hand, and a “pupil of the liberal arts,” on the other, can be seen as inhabiting its own form of aesthetics beyond the dichotomy of commercial “styling” and artistic “autonomy” (Feige, Arnold, and Wildt 2020). Starting from a point in philosophy, the question was not only what aesthetics of design might be, but also, vice versa, how basic concepts in aesthetics might be challenged by design and would need to be reconceptualized.

Even so, “aesthetics” may be a difficult term with many meanings and implications in different discourses—for example, in philosophy, psychology, and studies in media and the arts—and with emphasis on evaluative judgments, qualities of sensual perception, or special features of material objects. In the Western context, aesthetics has a long tradition for focusing on art and beauty and for being evaluative and judgmental, but beyond this, aesthetics deals broadly with the question of a sensual engagement with the world. Thus, to scrutinize the aesthetics of design is to look beyond the aesthetic paradigm of art but nevertheless still acknowledge this heritage.

Views on Aesthetics

To begin with, aesthetics is part of a popular discourse on design because so much of design in, for instance, lifestyle contexts is noticed and appreciated for its aesthetic surface qualities rather than the functional abilities to solve problems or meet practical needs. In popular culture and the discourse on design among manufacturers, designers, and consumers, the word “aesthetics” is often applied to the specific qualities of designed objects, often with a positive valorization. A part of the growing public interest in design is an interest in the aesthetic qualities of objects, and designers often testify to be interested in what aesthetics means in relation to design.

But whereas design objects have been acknowledged for their aesthetic qualities in the context of everyday consumption, several academic disciplines have taken critical stances against aesthetics, often because of the perception that it is superficial. In the context of German critical theory, Wolfgang Fritz Haug (2009) has severely critiqued aesthetic parameters in

design for seducing consumers through superficial styling. Haug's influential book on the critique of commodity aesthetics, *Kritik der Warenästhetik*, was originally published in 1971 but republished in 2009 with a book-length addition on commodity aesthetics in "high-tech capitalism," without Haug leaving or altering his original intention of critiquing the seductive means of capitalism.⁵ The concept of commodity aesthetics has, however, also been rearticulated in an open and unbiased exploration of the role of aesthetics means for communicating goods and, on the behalf of consumers, for interpreting the contribution of goods to identity construction (Drügh 2011; Drügh, Metz, and Weyand 2011; Baßler and Drügh 2019).

With a quite different argumentation, design history has, since its formulation as an independent discipline in the 1970s, taken a critical stance on aesthetics as a concept with relevance to a historical understanding of design. Privileging analysis of cultural, social, economic, and political contexts for design and attempting to avoid being labeled as a "form of pseudo art history" (Miller 1987, 142), design history has dismissed aesthetics as, variously, affiliated with art history and with superficial stylistic changes of form without a connection to context (cf. Lees-Maffei 2014a).

Nevertheless, the focus on aesthetics may create a link to one of the main constitutive factors of design in a historical perspective: namely, art (just think of the Arts and Crafts movement or the Bauhaus). Much of aesthetic theory, especially of philosophical provenience, primarily has dealt with art. I will acknowledge this connection but at the same time set the aesthetics of design free from the fixed affiliation to art and examine it on its own terms. On these terms, the ambition of the book is not to present a discussion of art versus design at length, which has occupied philosophers conceptualizing the aesthetics of design (e.g., Forsey 2013a; Feige 2018; Siegmund 2020), but to discuss the aesthetics of design as something specific *beyond* the aesthetics of art.

Why Aesthetics?

In either case, we may pose the question why aesthetics in design is relevant to take under consideration today. Do aesthetic concerns have any role to play in the present turmoil in the world, where climate change, pandemics, increasing inequality (on local and global scales), and devastating wars like the war in Ukraine are leading to economic and social instability,

destabilizing the world as we know it? Is aesthetics not just something “extra” to have in times of affluence and peace when basic needs are fulfilled?⁶

On this point, the question is not only about the role of design aesthetics but also the role of design in general. In contemporary design discourse, political, societal, and social questions are increasingly on the agenda. Sustainability, globalization, welfare, and health issues are often positioned as pressing themes for design, often with the premise that design may provide new paths or new solutions for a better future.⁷ In this vein, a tendency within contemporary design discourse is to propose macro-level schemes or visions of how design can be a means for a more sustainable future. Carried with a sense of urgency, examples of proposals are, how we can “design our way out” of the current problems (Thackara 2005, 1); how design can be turned into a diverse “pluriversal” activity with a “radical and constructive” imagination attuned to the needs of the Earth as well as local of communities (Escobar 2018, 7); or how design in changing from being human-centered to being planet-centered in the age of the Anthropocene (proposed to describe a geological age of dominating human impact) can offer “new methods and mindset to handle the giant-scale complexity of the climate and environmental crisis” (Engholm 2023, cover).⁸

This kind of critical engagement and ambition to create a better world through design is deeply integrated in design discourse as it is part of the heritage of modern progressive-optimist design at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹ But, as critically stated by design historian Kjetil Fallan (2022), the history of design is, “perhaps more than anything, a history of waste and wastefulness, of unsustainability,” contrasting the “usual gospel of design as a beneficial force” (10). Exactly the complexities and paradoxes of design’s engagement with sustainability is what Fallan pinpoints in his investigation of the moment in the 1960s and 1970s when design lost its innocence and status as a tool for progressive modernism by becoming complicit in unsustainable production and consumption. Today, waste is being produced in a previously unimaginable scale and, following the technological development, has ever new forms.¹⁰ Thus, a central aspect of design is to partake in a commercial circuit of production and consumption where people create meaning by engaging with the things they handle, act through, and are surrounded by. Being the “spirit of modern consumerism” (cf. Campbell 1987), the desire for the “new” is a strong force embedded

in modern subjectivity. As a driver for exploring and inventing the “new,” design may be caught in an inescapable catch-22 of nurturing endless desires while claiming to be doing good.

In the context of the dream of design as a globalized problem-solver, in any case, aesthetics may seem to play only a minor role as “beautiful appearance” (Joost 2012, 60) and to be a vehicle for increased consumption and identity affirmation among consumers, leading the world in the wrong direction. In my approach to aesthetics, however, the ambition is not to focus on the “appearance” as necessarily “beautiful” or, in a positive valorization, to evoke emotions of pleasure to be embedded in the experience economy of affluent societies. Instead, I start with a phenomenological interest in how design by different means creates frames and conditions for experience and how design objects by various means stand out as special for this framing of experiencing. Thus, having a near-view perspective on object design, my ambition is not to look futuristically at how things could be (better) on a large scale but at actual effects of everyday objects. Despite the pressing challenges of the planet, everyday objects are still present entities for human experiencing.

Hereby, aesthetic concerns lead by no means to a focus on design as superficial (but maybe to an interest in the surface and the appearance of design) but relate to ethical questions of “how we live through [design’s] creation of our material, and, increasingly, our immaterial or virtual environment” (Parsons, 2016, 129).¹¹ Expressed in another way: As aesthetics deals with value, it will always also be ethical (Findeli 1994). As a discipline characterizing “our presence in the world, how we are affected by the environment and how we on that background act in the world,” to employ the words of philosopher Carsten Friberg (2019, 43), aesthetics gives way for a reflection of how we perceive, sense, and are present in the world—that is, how we relate to our surroundings. Conversely, aesthetics enables a consideration of how the surroundings frame our being and understanding of the world when, for instance, seemingly value-neutral designs such as pictograms assert stereotypes of gender differences or modes of preferred actions.¹²

Therefore, aesthetics in my view is not to be understood honorifically, as an appraisal of certain objects incorporating specific qualities that encourage positive responses of pleasure or enjoyment, or identified with beauty; rather, it is a way of investigating how design objects, in positive as well as negative manners, appeal to and frame experience embedded in formative

contexts of power, economics, and ethics. Thus, my starting point is what I could call the *experientially effective qualities* of design objects.

In dealing with design, further, I distance my approach to aesthetics from the idea of disinterestedness, a part of the heritage from Kantian aesthetics of the eighteenth century and a signum for a distanced perception of the objects to be aesthetically evaluated. Aesthetic experience in design, however, needs to be conceptualized in relation to direct interaction with objects by proximal senses, stressing the element of the sensual engagement by subjects and the sensual appeal of objects. Furthermore, a continued insistence on disinterestedness as a hallmark of aesthetics would result in the marginalization of aesthetics as an isolated domain of special experiences to be entered only at special occasions. Models for this are the phenomenon of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) and the museum. Instead, aesthetics in design is pervasive and, indeed, omnipresent through the sensual interfaces through which we meet the world: in the designed frames for unfolding everyday life.

In terms of experience, aesthetic theories often point to aesthetic experience as *special* experiences. Either the special kind of human experience is in focus, such as in John Dewey's (2005, 37) notion of "having an experience" of fulfillment, unity, and self-sufficiency (which for Dewey is also an experience per se) in opposition to everyday, routine experiences. Or the focus is on experiences encouraged by certain object qualities when the design object stands out as special in some way and attracts attention—for instance, in the way that Martin Daniel Feige (2018, 63) states that design is about "special artefacts that require a special attention in use." It is therefore important to discuss the location of the aesthetic meaning of things in the relationship between subjects having experiences and objects asking to be experienced as special. Furthermore, what can be experienced aesthetically in the objects is being debated in the literature. Typically, theories with an origin in traditional art-oriented approaches to aesthetics suggest a focus on form and effect in terms of beauty (e.g., Pye 1978), whereas recent approaches in analytical aesthetic philosophy point to the functional as a point of departure for aesthetic appreciation (e.g., Forsey 2013a).

Important, as well, is to discuss if design can be aesthetic *only if* it requires attention, such as Feige claims. Much of the design that surrounds us is not being noticed as design in this sense. But as philosopher Glenn Parsons (2016, 20) points out, much design that has an appearance is not "made to

provide visual or aesthetics pleasure," such as engine parts; vice versa, not all design has an appearance but remains hidden, such as the inner parts of an object or, to use Parsons's example, electrical wiring inside walls. My claim is that all design has an appearance that creates framings of experience related to visual perception as well as tactile interaction in use. In this sense, aesthetic appeal is always in play, even though not always called "aesthetic" by a label or with a high intensity in experience, as implied by Dewey's concept of "having *an* experience," but in a less intense, omnipresent way.

Thus, in the course of the book, "appearance" will evolve as an important concept that not only scratches the surface of design but in its phenomenological application goes deeper.¹³ In this vein, philosopher Gernot Böhme (2019) stresses the importance of design because the "aesthetic shaping of the human environment" through design embraces "the wholeness of the human environment, not just as such, but in every detail" (181). Hereby, the implication is that an aesthetics of design always is an aesthetics of immanence, being about the world that we have, perhaps seeing it in a different way, and not being about some otherworldly reality.

Consequently, my argument is that aesthetics is productive as a concept to analyze design at phenomenological, cultural, and societal levels:

- *Aesthetics as an entry to look at design's framing of experience*: On a larger scale, aesthetics deals with design's presence in the world as offering itself to human experience. As clearly stated by Ben Highmore (2011, 37): "Aesthetic theory, perhaps more so than any other arena of theoretical writing, is concerned with experience." Aesthetics deals with "what presents itself to sensory experience," to use the words of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004, 13). In this view, and in Rancière's conception, aesthetics always relates to experience but is always also a matter of politics and power because access to what presents itself to experience is always framed by some actors or interests. To illustrate, the company Iittala, manufacturing the ribbed Aino Aalto glass on the cover of the book, is an actor producing its products as important in relation to what can be sensed and perceived as aesthetically relevant. In the case of the Aino Aalto glass, this aspect comes to expression in a high focus on visual and tactile appeal. In addition, aesthetics proposes an entry to conceptualize what experience is and, in the phrase of Colombian philosopher Augusto Solórzano (2018, 553), to "put the meaning of experience (in a worldly context) into play."

- *Aesthetics as the communicative potential of design objects*: In a closer focus on the objects of design, aesthetic concepts may allow reflections on the relation of function and form, the idea content of the design, and the potential of the objects to encourage reflection. Looking at, say, the mouth-blown glass featured on the cover, we can analyze how it through its curves and organic appearance presents itself to our experience. As a slightly intriguing design object, the glass may evoke wonder (but hardly astonishment) about its form and the intention of the designer. The organically shaped glass can be seen as a conceptual statement about sustainability, as it is made of recycled glass and deliberately varies in color and expression to break the norm of endlessly industrially manufactured glasses.
- *Aesthetics in the cultural context of design objects*: Aesthetic qualities of design objects are not given “in” the objects as an inherent essence but culturally produced in the process of aestheticization. They are being aestheticized, as discussed in chapters 3 and 7. To experience something aesthetically is itself an act of cultural meaning production where a specific mode of seeing and evaluating things is being required. Further, factors surrounding the objects, such as manufacturers, media, and institutions (e.g., museums) may also culturally produce the design objects as objects for specific experiences. By being part of the MoMA (Museum of Modern Art, New York) collection, probably the world’s most prestigious art collection of design, Iittala products obtain value as objects worth attention. And the cover photo of the two different glasses, taken specifically for this book, highlights the play of light in the glasses and has, accordingly, an effect of steering the viewer’s perception towards formal and visual qualities and not, say, a use situation. Just as in many ads and museum displays, the viewer may in this image be encouraged to appreciate and evaluate qualities of appearance as special.

These three levels of—or entries into—analyzing the aesthetics in design complement and relate to each other in such a way that each of them in principle can never stand alone even if the analysis often motivates us to focus on one of them. In the interdependency of the levels, I aim to state one of the central claims of this book: aesthetic qualities in design are not essences to be found in design objects but are specific qualities of design being culturally framed and produced.

Methodological Approach

In terms of methodology, the book combines approaches in design philosophy with cultural studies in design. In my view, this combination of approaches is necessitated by the topic of aesthetics, which is philosophical as well as cultural, especially (but not only) in relation to design. In its approach, the book is a contribution to the emerging field of philosophy of design with a special regard to a cultural-contextual understanding of design and, at the same time, a contribution to the field of cultural studies in design with a special attention to the question of aesthetics.

Philosophical Perspectives

First, entering a discussion of aesthetics, philosophical discourse is unavoidable. In the aftermath of Kant's seminal *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (written in 1790), the discipline of philosophical aesthetics has developed around questions about the role and character of aesthetic judgments. From philosophical aesthetics, we gain frameworks for describing central concepts of aesthetics, such as beauty, the ontology of aesthetic objects, and the location of the aesthetic in an interchange of objective reality and subjective response. Further, a philosophical approach to design enables a fundamental questioning of design in terms of epistemology (how design operates as a means for obtaining knowledge of the world), phenomenology (how design conditions experience), and ontology (what design is in this respect), which is vital in order to understand what characterizes design as a phenomenon and *Leitmedium* of the modern world.

In the last 20 years, design has increasingly become a topic for philosophical reflection. Design has gained in interest for philosophers as a phenomenon of thorough reflection on questions of function and use (e.g., Dorschel 2003; Parsons and Carlson 2008; Forsey 2013a), as a phenomenon of the modern world (Vial 2014), or in relation to technology (Verbeek 2005; Vermaas et al. 2009). Recently, comprehensive works (with titles just as comprehensive) have been published: for example, Glenn Parsons's *The Philosophy of Design* (2016); Daniel Martin Feige's *Design. Eine philosophische Analyse* (2018); the 25-chapter-long anthology *Advancements in the Philosophy of Design* (Vermaas and Vial 2018),¹⁴ and the 20-chapter-long anthology *Philosophie des Designs* (Feige, Arnold, and Rautzenberg 2020). In addition, design researchers have testified philosophical interests in questions of the

epistemological foundation of design and how design is a means to constitute new knowledge (Galle 2008, 2011; see also several of the articles in Vermaas and Vial 2018, e.g., Schneller 2018). In an anthology with the direct relevant title *Designästhetik. Theorie und soziale Praxis* (Ruf and Neuhaus 2020), reflections on the intersection between philosophy and media aesthetics are presented. As a “context dependent and complex process of coding,” design is seen to obtain its aesthetic meaning through its “mediating conditions” (12) in media and design practice.¹⁵ What design does, according to coeditor Oliver Ruf (2020), is to produce formats for enabling aesthetic experience and hereby also offer a common space for experience, “einen gemeinsamen Erlebnisraum” (22), for consumers.

In this context, my specific focus is on *design phenomenology* in the question of how design frames human experience.¹⁶ Whereas phenomenology as a philosophical discipline in general deals with the conditions of human experience in relation to what can be experienced, design phenomenology entails a reversal and emphasizes the role of design, in its many types of appearance and its creation of tactile and visual surfaces of the modern world, for affecting and structuring experience. In this instance, design phenomenology partakes in the “material turn” where a “complex scientific narrative” within the humanities and social sciences places the “material and thing-oriented aspect in the foreground of the description of culture and society” (Heibach and Rohde 2015, 14). Partaking in this “material turn” are the actor-network theory, claiming objects to possess active agency in networks with humans—for example, in guiding behavior (cf. Latour 2005)—and material culture studies pointing to the steering role of the “material environment” in the “development of social forms” (Dant 1999, 12). Further, relating directly to phenomenology with application for design, philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005) employs the concept of “postphenomenology” (initiated by Don Ihde) as a way of acknowledging the role of “things” for mediating “how human beings are present in their world and how the world is present to them” (235). As stated by Prasad Boradkar (2010), humans design things, and things design humans: “People and things configure each other” (4).

In my proposal, aesthetics is relevant for design phenomenology as a conceptualization of *how* design frames experience in cultural and social contexts. On this point, a conceptualization of aesthetics that considers sensual, conceptual, and contextual-cultural dimensions of design in combination

(cf. chapter 3) is beneficial. In this vein, I will argue that design phenomenology not only deals with the objects as material entities, which may form what the “world” may look like to us, but also with the effect of their meaning content, which needs conceptual processing. That aesthetics takes place as a negotiation of sensual and conceptual meaning points to Kant’s original statement of aesthetics (cf. chapter 1) and aligns with a central claim by cultural theorists Moritz Baßler and Heinz Drügh (2021, 131) in their book on contemporary aesthetics that aesthetics contains modes of intensity and distance, “fascinated distance, qualified intensity”: the intensity of the perceptually given in a dialogue with and being cross-fertilized by the distance of conceptual reflection leading to fascination.

In intersecting sensual and conceptual, design theorist Tom Bieling (2020, 7) states that “our way of knowing the world and our ways of interpreting are always interlinked with the things that surround us.” This is a formulation resonating the phenomenological approaches of Flusser (1993), Burckhardt (2010), and Selle (2007), who all investigate design at the intersection of material presence and “invisible” effects of the “idea” of design in devising action or installing cultural notions.¹⁷ What is important to acknowledge in this approach to design phenomenology is, first, that experience is framed by sensual-material means as well as by conceptual idea contents, and, second, the idea content of the design is not something beyond the design but immanently integrated in the design objects.

To exemplify, the framing of human experience is not only a matter of materially guiding behavior through, for instance, bumps on the road, or cars only being able to drive if the driver’s seat belt is fastened (remarkably, a common denominator of these examples from Latour and Verbeek is their origin in traffic), where the question of experience is limited to an immediate bodily or behavioral response to a material presence in the world. Material design objects also affect experience through the kind of conceptual meaning and the cultural possibilities they evoke—for instance, when an electric bike evokes an idea of easy mobility in combination with a cultural notion of an environmentally sustainable way of getting around. An electric bike not only offers a way of structuring behavioral patterns of moving through the traffic, but it also sets the scene for human experiencing through the cultural possibilities and constraints entailed by it. The space of cultural meaning in a material object such as the electric bike relates not only to the ability to be mobile and drive fast but also to cultural notions of

what speed and mobility are in modern traffic and how the electric bike offers a new mode of being part of the flow. Electric bikes relate to and change the constituents of experience by offering a new way of moving through the traffic *and* a new concept of what movement is, which, ultimately, may feed into larger societal contexts of traffic planning and investments.

Cultural Perspectives

Second, *cultural studies* are required to understand the changed conditions of the production, circulation, and consumption of aesthetic meaning, whether in the form of artworks, design objects, or commercial settings in advertising or retail spaces. Objects and appearances to be aesthetically evaluated are not just “there” but are culturally produced as objects for specific experiences stemming from specific historical conditions.

Within the broad field of cultural-historical studies in design, the focus has been on studying cultural, social, economic, and political contexts for design, especially the relationship between production, design practice, and consumption, whether in a context of cultural studies (Hebdige 1994; du Gay et al. 2013), design culture (Highmore 2009; Julier 2014), or design history (Fallan 2010; Raizman 2010; Sparke 2013). In addition, Kjetil Fallan (2019) has propagated design history, “arguably the most established form of humanistic design studies” (15), as a methodological entry for investigating not only the past but also developments in contemporary society in relation to sustainability and digitalization.¹⁸ Furthermore, material culture studies have close affiliation to the field of design by being interested in the material artifacts within the context of and with a contributing role to culture (Miller 1987; Dant 1999; Attfield 2000; Miller 2010). Being “undisciplined disciplines,” to use the term Fallan (2010) uses (at least) about design history and material culture studies, having produced a “large amount of highly diverse research” (35) on methodologically eclectic grounds, the common trait is, however, the focus on cultural analysis and the importance of context in order to understand design.¹⁹

Aesthetics in design needs, I will argue, to be investigated in relation to cultural contexts of design. Interestingly, however, aesthetics has only played a minor role in these disciplinary approaches. In relation to design history, the concept of aesthetics has, as mentioned, mostly been affiliated with art history. Within the context of design culture, aesthetics has been seen primarily as a mere matter of “taste” in the sociological tradition from

Bourdieu. An exception, however, is the proposal by Ben Highmore (2009). Conceiving the modern world to be produced as “designed sensescapes” (7), his approach leads to a concept of “social aesthetics,” dealing with “the sensual material life of objects, and the subjects that interact with them” (10). Highmore, rightly, claims the importance of the social context for perceiving and apprehending the sensescapes of modern design, while at the same time embedding this in aesthetics as “concerned with material experiences, with the way the sensual world greets the sensorial body and with the affective forces that are generated in such meetings” (10). In this way, Highmore points to the scope of an aesthetic approach to contemporary design culture, where both objects and subjects are in focus: the character of the sensual worlds that meet us and the affective, psychological reactions to those meetings.

By investigating the cultural logics of aesthetics in design and aestheticization in relation to design, this book will offer a contribution and a corrective to the field of cultural studies in design. The book will “do” design philosophy in the sense that aesthetics is theorized to be a central entry to understanding the importance of design as a contemporary cultural phenomenon.

Structure

The book is organized into two sections: a theoretical section and a section with studies in implication. The book presents a coherent argument, but the chapters can be read independently. The chapters in the section on implications do, however, build on insights in the theoretical section. These are, where necessary, recapitulated.

In the first section on *theory*, chapter 1 presents the concept of aesthetics. Chapter 2 reviews central positions relating aesthetics to design. In the introduction to central topics in dealing with design aesthetics, the review is structured by core concepts such as beauty, function, appearance, and pleasure. In chapter 3, I present the book’s comprehensive theoretical framework on design aesthetics, differentiating between sensual, conceptual, and contextual aspects of aesthetics. The discussion of culturally contextualizing the aesthetics in design leads to chapter 4 on aesthetic experience in design. Being determinant for what is being regarded, evaluated, and experienced as aesthetic, aesthetic categories get in focus, and the chapter

offers an analysis of how aesthetic categories have changed in relation to design. The chapter takes a contemporary starting point but looks back on former aesthetic categories.

The second section on *implications* unfolds case studies of design practice, objects, and modes of perception in relation to design aesthetics. Chapter 5 examines aesthetic concerns in the phase before the finalized design object; that is, how designers as a part of their practices work with and consider aesthetics. A central focus in the analysis is the role of the prototype as a means in the design process of negotiating aesthetic concerns. In chapter 6, I employ the concept of “post-material aesthetics” to examine how digital technology is being accessed through design objects and how this affects sensual as well as conceptual aspects of design. A central foundation for the analysis is to establish how the advent of digital technology conditions the cultural circuit of design in new ways. In chapter 7, I examine cultural constructions of aesthetic perception in the arena of consumption: how consumers perceive aesthetically and how perception is aestheticized in different settings to focus on aesthetic aspects of design.

In conclusion, I briefly discuss whether we can have “too much aesthetics.” On this point, I argue that we may not be able to solve the problems of the world with design aesthetics (or with design as such), but what we can do is to critically investigate how design constitutes aesthetic interfaces for us to engage with what “world” is to us. As a shortcut to the argument of the whole book, a glossary is included at the end to function as a quick guide to design aesthetics.

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