

Introduction

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Design is an omnipresent, aesthetic-functional phenomenon, one that is culturally loaded and broadly influential. Since ancient times, design has played a crucial role in shaping both our intimate daily experiences and broader societal structures. It influences behavior, preferences, cultural norms and movements, political or personal identities, and economic systems. Today, design is not only a thriving field of practice but also an evolving area of academic inquiry, one that is becoming a self-standing discipline. It is, of course, important to define ‘design’. But, in developing our understanding of it, we also need to analyze its relationships to associated fields, such as ontology, cognition and perception, ethics, politics, social conduct, fine or popular art, everyday aesthetics, and science and technology.

The special issue *Design and its Relations* takes up this mission. We aim to reveal and study the interactions between design as an aesthetic-functional field and various auxiliary concepts, ideas, phenomena, and disciplines. The essays in the special issue thus address a range of design affiliations. These include both (a) relatively abstract affiliations—such as aesthetics, perception and appreciation, beauty, ethics, science, rationalism, and the idea of abstractness itself—and (b) more direct topics, including design’s relations to photographic systems and even cultural views of parenthood given through the evolution of crib shapes (which is a typical substantiation of design’s impact on humanity’s foundations).

The volume opens with the basic relations between design and definitions, namely, design and philosophy. Thomas Leddy’s essay “Design and Definitions: Reflections on the Question of ‘What is Design?’” explores the design concept, highlighting its “contested” status. Leddy critiques traditional definitions and proposes an “honorific definition”, which blends modernist functionality with postmodernist self-expression. This new definition positions design at the intersection of these two perspectives across various platforms. It also focuses on interactions between users and the design object rather than just the designer’s intentions. Leddy further challenges Parsons’ narrow view of modernist design as the paradigm. He then suggests a cultural, holistic, and dialectical approach, one that is intended to reconcile modernism and postmodernism. Leddy’s Hegelian framework entails viewing modernism as a thesis, postmodernism as an antithesis, and the resulting synthesis as the future. This underscores the equal importance of the designer’s and the user’s roles in shaping design. By emphasizing user engagement in the design process, Leddy proposes a living definition that adapts to design’s evolving nature. Using Facebook as an example, he illustrates how design both affects and is affected by our daily lives and interactions.

Thinking abstractly about design leads us naturally to Pauline von Bonsdorff’s illuminating analysis of the relationship between design and a basic element of our aesthetic experience, which she calls “tacit aesthetics”. In her essay “Design and Tacit Aesthetics: design as the art of objects-in-use,” von Bonsdorff draws on the idea of tacit knowledge to challenge established views that prioritize sight over supposed “lower senses” like touch or smell, as well as balance and movement. Following Gibson’s ecological theory of perception, Polanyi’s notion of tacit knowledge, and Merleau-Ponty’s concept

of dynamic attention, von Bonsdorff claims that touch and movement are central to tacit aesthetic perception. This is especially relevant in our everyday experiences with design objects and their appreciation. Rather than an atomic perspective, von Bonsdorff emphasizes rich, incidental interactions with design objects—interactions that are deeply entwined with individual, spatial, and cultural contexts. Perceiving everyday objects as cultural entities (rather than just tools) engages various contexts that shape our perception. These contexts include sense experiences, use patterns, and design ideologies. Von Bonsdorff illustrates this with examples of Finnish tableware from the mid-twentieth century, particularly Kaj Franck's designs. Doing so demonstrates how pertinent material, form, and design ideologies influence our aesthetic engagement with objects.

A profound and comprehensive characterization of design objects as essentially constituted “during the user's active interaction with design objects” is offered by Matilde Carrasco Barranco as well in her “Design and Aesthetic Appreciation: Form, Functionality, Performativity.” Analyzing the relations between design and methods of appreciation, she argues that design objects' aesthetic qualities are not just inherent. They are performative, in addition to formal and functional. The innovative essay focuses on design's aesthetic appreciation, which is shaped by an object's actual use—sometimes the use of each individual. Carrasco Barranco renounces the standard focus on stable properties, instead offering a more active and pluralistic view of design aesthetics. This outlook broadens design philosophy's scope by enriching our understanding of design. It does so by (a) acknowledging that beauty and functionality are intertwined with performative experiences and (b) challenging the formalism–functionalism dichotomy. Jane Forsey and Panos Paris also offer theories of design appreciation that entail the dissolution of this dichotomy. Both provide aptly thought-provoking ways to think about beauty and design.

Jane Forsey's essay “Design and Beauty: Functional Style” presents a novel and intriguing theory of design's distinctive aesthetics. She does so by examining the interplay between form and function in design objects from within the frame of the object's purpose and (stable) ontological identity. Drawing on Immanuel Kant's concept of dependent beauty, Forsey proposes a thought-provoking “functional style” category and challenges what she calls “unified theories of beauty”. These theories equate design with art, which Forsey finds inadequate for capturing functional objects' aesthetic value. She instead grounds her theory in four key distinctions: design and art, aesthetic and instrumental judgments, function and use, and ornamentation and decoration. Her intentionalist stance supports the idea that design appreciation should focus on object functionality and that aesthetic experiences are rooted in our knowledge of the objects' practical use. “Functional style” then emerges from how well a design fulfills its intended purpose, linking its form directly to its functional success. This perspective represents a valuable contribution to aesthetics and design philosophy.

Like Forsey and Carrasco Barranco, Panos Paris' theory of design aesthetics supports the claim that design owns a unique kind of beauty while offering an innovative and deep study of design's relations to ethics and values. Paris aims to fill the ethical gap in theories of design beauty because, as he puts it, “design has an ineliminable ethical dimension, in a broad sense of being linked to the humanly good, and that it is through a range of values that we perceive design beauty”. Paris' essay “Design and Value: The Ethical Nature of Beautiful Design” thus introduces an axiological conception of functional beauty, one that addresses the values this beauty embodies and its impact on daily life (from architecture to technology). In covering both design objects' various affordances and function's complex relations to forms, Paris broadens the notion of functions (as relevant to design). Design beauty is closely tied to functionality and ethical considerations. Beautiful design is, consequently, “care–full design”.

An integration between the aesthetic and functional nature of design, with an emphasis on problem–solving, is proposed by Saul Fisher. His essay “Design Science and Aesthetics” brilliantly explores aesthetic values' foundational role within the design science framework. This field is concerned with solving practical problems through systematically creating and evaluating artifacts. Fisher

argues for a recalibration of normative frameworks to ensure that we recognize the indispensability of aesthetic values. The traditional view maintains that design decisions are guided by ethical, social, political, and functional considerations. In response, Fisher introduces the “Smuggling Hypothesis”. This hypothesis suggests that aesthetic values are inherently embedded in all aspects of design science and should not be treated as an optional criterion (i.e. secondary to values like cost, utility, or ease of use). Aesthetic values are, then, essential to both the success criteria and constitutional design norms of designed objects. Drawing on Van de Poel’s work on value conflicts, Fisher demonstrates how design decisions often involve competing values—values that are not easily reconciled. He also argues that standard approaches to resolving these conflicts (such as cost-benefit analysis or maximin strategies) often fail to safeguard the inclusion of aesthetic considerations. This reconceptualization not only ensures a more holistic approach to design but also positions aesthetics at the center of design science’s nature and practice.

Michalle Gal’s essay critically investigates relations between design and the Western rationalist project. This involves moving away from the integration of function and aesthetics seen in earlier essays and toward what Gal calls a “visualist” theory of design. Visualism endorses externalist philosophy to claim that we are primarily visual beings. Indeed, our engagements with the world mainly originate in the visual sphere and its rich affordances. Visualism stands in contrast to the instrumental rationalism that has dominated the philosophy of design. Gal critiques rationalism by highlighting two pervasive and paradigmatic phenomena in design: (1) the variety of forms that can fulfill a single function and (2) the variety of uses that can emerge from a single form. Instrumental rationalism defines ‘design’ as a coherent process, one that moves from a rational goal to an object’s proper means and use. This involves primarily evaluating design in terms of efficiency. Gal argues, however, that design objects’ diverse aesthetic forms and the creative ways that users engage with them do not conform to the instrumental rational plan. Instead, they are guided by aesthetic motivations and the relevant design’s visual affordances. She further claims that design objects’ multiplicity of forms and emergent uses often play a more significant role than rationality in shaping the nature of design itself. For Gal, these encounters with design objects are intrinsic to our essence and ontology as visual beings. She thereby offers a visualist, anti-rationalist theory of design. This suggests that aesthetics and visual perception are fundamental to both design practice and human nature.

Gregory Galford and Jeremy Barris offer an original and fascinating theory about the relationship between design and meaning. In their essay “Design and the Constitution of Semantic or Conceptual Meaning”, they set out to demonstrate that design’s stylistic elements constitute semantic meanings, “even when that meaning is strictly of the type we typically think of as independent of stylistic considerations: the kind of meaning which is that of words”. Galford and Barris use Robert Venturi’s architectural philosophy as a paradigmatic example. This philosophy challenges the modernist pursuit of purity and function by advocating for a richer, more ambiguous expression of meaning through design. Venturi’s notion of the “duck” versus the “decorated shed” emphasizes how the value of visual cues and signs in architecture reflect real-life complexity. His work—including the Vanna Venturi House and Guild House—illustrates this approach by incorporating “double-functioning elements” that operate on multiple scales and interpretations. Against the postmodern view of semantic meaning, Galford and Barris maintain that meanings are quite stable and determinant. The authors are critical of Derrida’s, Lacan’s, and Wittgenstein’s theories of meaning, and aim to accommodate the possibility of semantic stability. Postmodernism embraces ambiguity and contradiction, but, for Galford and Barris, it also allows design elements to convey genuine, unequivocal meanings. Thus, the interplay between stylistic features and meanings in both architecture and philosophy underscores a tension between determinacy and indeterminacy. This, in turn, reflects human experience’s multifaceted nature.

Gal Ventura also reflects on design and culture, offering an illuminating analysis of the deep relations between design tools and culture. She considers such relations to be exemplified by coordi-

nation between the evolution of parenthood and cradle designs from the modern era, viewing them as cultural artifacts that reflect broader social dynamics. Her essay “The Design of the Modern Crib: Hygiene, Configuration, Materiality, and Social Status” traces the journey from natural sleep practices to the regulated standards of modern medicine. In doing so, she illustrates how cradles (like other consumer goods) serve as both (a) functional objects for infant sleep and (b) tools that shape perceptions of parenthood, domestic ideals, and social status and norms. Ventura emphasizes how infant beds (especially among upper-middle-class families) were designed to confirm class and adhere to health and hygiene practices. Her study also reveals how these beds can mediate human relationships, thereby shaping behaviors and decisions. By examining cradles and cribs through this lens, Ventura offers insights into how they reflect evolving, childcare-related social and cultural settings (e.g. the medicalization of sleep and modern hygiene standards). As cradles became symbols of social distinction, they also came to signify children’s growing role in consumer culture. This, in turn, solidified children’s status as significant cultural artifacts.

Like Ventura, Yanai Toister addresses the relationship between design and cultural evolution. He does so by offering a new and radical functionalist-technological account of the interactions between photography and design. Toister shifts the focus of photography theory from aesthetics to what he calls “programmable principles”. Rather than looking at photographic pieces, his vantage point in “Design and Photography: Pinhole, Perpendicular, Programmable” is photography’s design and apparatus. His focus is on (a) unique and untraditional kinds, whose post-production images cannot be pre-determined and (b) what can be called “epistemological cameras”. Via a historical-philosophical account of photographic apparatus, Toister opens a new path of thought about photography as a medium of design. In doing so, he calls for a thorough reevaluation of photographic education and practice, thereby encouraging investigation into the conceptual foundations supporting the medium. This approach aims to cultivate a profound and nuanced appreciation of design, specifically when it comes to photography’s nature and possibilities.

Jeffrey Strayer’s essay “Design and Abstraction” closes the collection because it allows us to return to the original design concept as an artistic piece’s order and composition. Strayer studies this concept’s relation to one of the cornerstones of philosophy and art: abstractness. In analyzing the intrinsic connection between artwork design and abstraction in both theory and practice, Strayer invokes two kinds of design: (1) design as art’s form and composition and (2) design as a creative activity, one that involves following a plan for an object’s conception and/or construction. This concerns understanding how design and abstraction intersect when creating the most reductive and radical artworks. The essay traces abstraction’s development in art history, focusing on the concepts of “something” and “nothing”. Strayer argues that producing radically reductive artworks requires more than limiting an object’s visible properties. Indeed, it demands an understanding of the necessary conditions for making and perceiving art. Strayer also discusses the deliberate construction of an object’s “thisness” and how abstract design can reveal essential qualities. The latter invokes “Essentialism”—an extreme form of abstraction. Strayer concludes by (a) exploring how observers perceive the ideas of “something”, “everything”, and “nothing” and (b) highlighting the role of language in shaping this kind of perception.

In bringing the above diverse perspectives together, the special issue *Design and its Relations* offers a comprehensive examination of design’s multifaceted nature and its deep connections with sundry disciplines and ideas. The essays challenge conventional boundaries, showing how design both influences and is influenced by philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, culture, and technology. By highlighting both theoretical and practical dimensions, the collection depicts design as going beyond conceptions of an aesthetic-functional nature. Indeed, design is deeply embedded in human experience, thought, and social structures. Through these essays, readers are invited to rethink design’s role in shaping our world. Design is not merely about objects or visual elements. Instead, it represents a dynamic and evolving discourse—a discourse that engages with the core of what it means to be

human. Ultimately, this special issue underscores the importance of viewing design as an ever-expanding field of inquiry, one whose interactions with other knowledge domains continue to reveal new insights and exciting possibilities.

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Notes

¹ See Gal and Ventura, 2023, *Introduction to Design Theory*, “Definitions of Design”, London: Routledge.