

Evaluating Aesthetics in Design: A Phenomenological Approach

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Introduction

Discussing aesthetics as an aspect of design touches upon one of the most vital matters of how design functions as a means of communication. Especially in non-professional contexts, when design artifacts are noticed and appreciated, it is more often for their *aesthetic* qualities than their practical or functional ability to solve more or less complex or well-defined problems. Furthermore, working with aesthetics is often regarded as a core competence in design, and the pervasive attention paid to aesthetics can be annoying to designers, as it implies that they work solely with artistic matters of surface, appearance, and styling as opposed to, for example, functionality. Paradoxically, aesthetics in design has been a neglected area of research, even though there has been some attention given to understanding the aesthetic qualities of the non-functional, "emotional" factors in design.¹ Attempts to establish a scientific discourse for design have instead placed emphasis on analyzing and prescribing the *methodology* in designing (as in the practice-based framework of Design Methods);² or the impact of *culture* and social processes on the making and consumption of design (as in studies of design history and the material culture of design, where matters of aesthetics are often consciously set aside due to an ideological struggle with the pervading notion of "good design" and its prescriptive aesthetics of outer beauty leading to moral improvement);³ or the issue of *meaning* in design—that is, how "form follows meaning"—and how design, on a semantic basis, makes sense in different contexts (e.g. contexts of use, language, life cycle, and ecology).⁴ All of these positions have more or less left out any analytical consideration of aesthetics. However, raising the issue of aesthetics in design is crucial, and not doing so leads to diffuse and sometimes unqualified discussions.

In this article, I will attempt to establish a conceptual framework for discussing, theorizing, analyzing, and practically addressing aesthetics in design. I point mainly to the theory of phenomenology but also touch upon various aspects of the tradition of aesthetic theory in European philosophy. My aim is, however, not to use a philosophical, conceptual discourse to establish the "true" meaning of the word "aesthetic" to define it once and for all. Due to the heterogeneity of the concept, this would be an impossible task. The history of the concept itself has led in many directions—it was coined

- 1 To the discussion of emotion in design, see the groundbreaking works by Donald A. Norman, *Emotional Design* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) and Patrick Jordan, *Designing Pleasurable Products* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000).
- 2 In the line from John C. Jones and Peter Slann's seminal 1962 conference on "Systematic and Intuitive Methods in Engineering, Industrial Design, Architecture and Communications" to e.g. Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (London: Temple Smith, 1983), Bryan Lawson, *How Designers Think* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 1980/2005) and Nigel Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (London: Springer Verlag, 2006).
- 3 See Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986/2005); Judy Attfield, *Wild Things* (Oxford: Berg, 2000). The connection in the ideology of "good design" of beauty and moral is itself a classical notion that can be traced back to the Sentimentalist discourse of the eighteenth century.
- 4 See Klaus Krippendorff: "On the Essential Contexts of Artifacts or on the Proposition that 'Design is Making Sense (of Things)'," in *The Idea of Design*, R. Buchanan and V. Margolin, eds. (London: MIT Press, 1995), 156–184, and *The Semantic Turn. A New Foundation for Design* (Boca Raton: Taylor & Francis, 2006).

by Alexander Baumgarten in *Aesthetica* (1750–58) to describe a philosophical discipline that investigates the “lower” sensual aspects of human experience as opposed to the higher realm of logics. This led to the debate on taste and value judgment of beauty and the sublime in Kant’s seminal *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (1790), which preceded the close link between the work of art and the philosophy of aesthetics from Schelling’s Romantic-idealistic celebration of the work of art in *Philosophie der Kunst* (1802) to Adorno’s Modern-critical investigations of the communicative means and utopian potential of art in *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970).⁵

Instead, my aim is to point to some of the directions that a contemporary *design aesthetics* may take if it is serious about being an aesthetics specific to design and not to art, the classic topic of Romantic and Modern aesthetic theory. Hence, my path to a new understanding of aesthetics in design will not go through the traditional discussions of art as a medium of aesthetic appreciation and communication, as this risks reducing design to a matter and medium of artistic aspiration. Of course, a design object can be the result of purely artistic and autonomous self-expression, but it often has a wider context. In relation to design methodology, it will be more justified to speak of design as a meeting point of multiple interests (those of a client, designer, and manufacturer) and as a complex negotiation between “problem formulation” and “solution generation.”⁶ From a point of view of cultural analysis, design is a practice of innovation and change, not to be separated from the culturally circumscribed patterns of consumption. Further, an appropriation of design by the aesthetics of art, implying a view of design as art, may hamper an understanding of the unique complexity of almost every design object or solution: that design is not the expression of a lone artist, but the result of commercial and societal processes⁷ and, at best, of an ambition to grasp the potential power of giving shape to our environments in innovative and progressive ways that are appropriate to human needs.

Still, however, one should not neglect issues of aesthetics in design, if only because designed objects contribute to the ongoing aestheticization of everyday life that is so prevalent in late Modernism. Aesthetics is no longer the exclusive domain of art but applies to our immediate, sensuous experience of the world. To demonstrate my points, I will examine two examples, both of Danish provenance: interior designs by Verner Panton from the 1960s and various designs of round chairs from the past ten years by designer Louise Campbell.

Form and Sensuous Experience

Evaluating aesthetics in design is mainly a matter of grasping its sensuous qualities, or, rather, design’s distinctive appeals to the senses. This does not mean that assessing aesthetic qualities in design exhausts all the different properties that design encompasses (for

5 In *Ästhetische Theorie*, Adorno precisely locates the beginning of the collaboration of art and aesthetics in the philosophy of Schelling: “Ever since Schelling, whose aesthetics is called a philosophy of art, has the aesthetic interest been concentrated on works of art” (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 97.

6 See Cross, *op. cit.*, 77–93, and Lawson, *op. cit.* 112–26.

7 As clearly stated by Forty who argues strongly against regarding design as works of art; *op. cit.*, 7.

example, functionality and sustainability).⁸ But it does emphasize the function of design objects as sensually appealing artifacts as well as issues concerning form and surface. My dual purpose here is to explore how form and appearance can be qualified as means of a type of aesthetic communication that challenges experience, and to discuss the role of form as a challenge to our understanding of things.

These issues of form, experience, and understanding in design can be situated within two powerful frameworks. First of all, in recent years there has been a tendency to try to loosen the connection between art and aesthetic theory, and, to revisit Baumgarten's original idea of applying aesthetics to sensual matter (in Old Greek, *aístheta*, "that which can be sensed"). This movement from works of art to general sensuous experience and, further, to questions concerning how reality is arranged and perceived aesthetically, is the topic of a new era of aesthetic theory that has been unfolding since the 1990s in works by philosophers Richard Schusterman,⁹ Martin Seel,¹⁰ and Gernot Böhme.¹¹ Tellingly, the title of one of Böhme's recent works features the Greek root of the word aesthetics: *Aisthētik. Lectures on aesthetics as a common doctrine of perception*.

Second, this bias of recent aesthetic theory can be seen in the contextualization of phenomenology as a philosophy that addresses the fundamental premise of the importance of experience and the basic conditions of experience. The term "phenomenology" was coined by the philosopher Edmund Husserl based on Old Greek etymology as the doctrine (*logos*) of that which shows itself (*phainomenon*). The point is that phenomenology, as a theory of experience, can address certain aspects of aesthetics related to sensuous appearance and experience. In the following, I will use the theory of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty to discuss various modes of sensual qualities in design. In an important essay, "L'entrelacs—Le chiasme,"¹² Merleau-Ponty introduces two kinds of interlaced structures in experience to which I will refer in the following discussion of two important aspects of aesthetics in design.

1. An Aesthetics of Sensual Relation

Merleau-Ponty's first structure takes its departure in immediate and concrete experience. Here, Merleau-Ponty follows a basic assumption in phenomenology: That experience is a matter for a concrete and specific subject whose consciousness is incarnated in a body that is located in a concrete world of things and intersubjective relations. Reversely, the "world" is only ever a matter for a bodily incarnated subject. For Merleau-Ponty, the consequences are radical in the sense that it is impossible to separate the experiencing subject from the experienced world; subject and object are reciprocally intertwined; the sensing subject cannot be separated from the sensed material, and the viewer cannot be separated from the viewed but participates

8 See Morten Kyndrup: "Aesthetics and border lines: 'design' as a liminal case," <http://www.aestetik.au.dk/gr/papers/morten_kyndrup>, 9. (accessed 10/2009).

9 *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

10 *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* (München: Hanser, 2000); *Die Macht des Erscheinens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007).

11 *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995); *Asthetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2001).

12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Éditions Gallimard: Paris, 1964), 170–201.

in it and is influenced by it. Likewise the sensing or viewing subject can herself be sensed or viewed and thereby become an object. In this way, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the traditional dichotomy of subject and object. Further, in a sort of deconstructive gesture he attempts to reverse the dichotomy in order to show that it has a common foundation in a figure of continuity that he calls the *flesh*, "la chair." He speaks of density of the flesh ("l'épaisseur de chair") as a means of communication between the viewer and the thing. Similarly, the body is located in a chiasmic structure with the world: "The body participates in the order of things and likewise the world is universal flesh."¹³ Experience, in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, is an ongoing exchange between subject and object that takes place in the common material of "chair."

Almost as an explication of Merleau-Ponty's notion of "chair," the German philosopher Gernot Böhme has developed a powerful concept of ambience, *Atmosphäre*, to analyze how things, situations, and surroundings appeal to us. Or, rather, Böhme likewise deconstructs the dichotomy of subject and object, defining ambience as a kind of relation between subject and object. The point is that ambience can only evolve if there is an experiencing subject. However, it is not an inherent part of the subject¹⁴ but rather objective as the result of an effect evoked by a specific constellation of things.¹⁵ Thus, to Böhme the concept of ambience becomes the main designator for the conditions of perception, the "primary object for perception":¹⁶

Obviously, ambiances are neither conditions of the subject, nor characteristics of the object. Still, however, they are only experienced in the actual perception of a subject and are co-constituted in their being, their character, through the subjectivity of the perceiver. And even though they are not characteristics of the objects, they are obviously produced through the characteristics and interplay of objects. That is, ambiances are something *between* subject and object. They are not something relational, they are the relation itself... For us, the ambience is the first reality of perception [*Wahrnehmungswirklichkeit*], out of which subject and object can be separated.¹⁷

In this context, three aspects of Böhme's theory are particularly important.

First, as a theory of sensuous experience and relation, to Böhme the main concern of aesthetics is how ambience works and constitutes a specific relation between subject and object: "For aesthetics, the ambiances are therefore the first and essential reality. They are the perceptible co-existence of subject and object."¹⁸ In Böhme's perspective, there might be a "real reality" behind the operations of ambience, but what is important for aesthetics is the "reality of appearance" which puts an emphasis on how (perception

13 "le corps appartient à l'ordre des choses comme le monde est chair universelle." Ibid., 176–79.

14 The all-importance of the subject for the way experience and cognition operate stands at the heart of Immanuel Kant's influential epistemology in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781/87). Kant's point is, basically, that all experience of any "world" is a matter of subjective cognition according to certain unavoidable modes of perception (time, space) and a specific amount of conceptual categories. The weakness of Kant's epistemology is, however, that it doesn't take into account how the world that we meet can have different kinds of expression, thus generating a certain feed-back on the conditions of experience.

15 Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), 33.

16 Ibid., 48.

17 Böhme, *Ästhetik*, 54–56.

18 Ibid., 57.



Figure 1 (above)
Railway clock, 1944.
Design: Hans Hilfiker
Photo credit: MOBATime

of) "reality" is mediated through ambience, on the effect of surface and form, and on the value of staging meaning.¹⁹

Second, ambience is experienced and expresses itself as a coherent unit. Instead of separating the various aspects of sensuous experience (i.e., sight, hearing, scent, etc.) and asking how one sense can evoke effects in another, ambience functions as the perceptual background upon which things and surroundings present themselves, and where one may look for sensuous differentiation. In this context, Böhme discusses the traditional aesthetic concept of synaesthesia and especially the power of color.²⁰

And, third, ambience is not only something to be experienced but also something to be *made*, or manipulated. Böhme speaks of "aesthetic work," the intention of giving things, surroundings, and people certain qualities that let them appear as something special with a power of appeal to be perceived in a certain (controlled) way.²¹ In this context, he mentions creative areas such as stage work, commercials, art, architecture, and design as examples. This notion of aesthetic work is clearly linked to today's prevalent concept of experience economy²² and to the way in which our surroundings—especially with the help of design—can be seen as "aesthetically calculated," where the artifacts in question are conceived with a high degree of "aestheticity," construed to be perceived "aesthetically."²³

Design as a Structure of Appearance

The strength of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological and Böhme's aesthetic-philosophical frameworks is that they conceptualize the relation of sensual experience between subjective apprehension and objective appearance. However, the basic shortcoming of Merleau-Ponty's theory is that he does not address the issue of the meaning and importance of *how* the world appears to us with its concrete things, surroundings, and people. Merleau-Ponty thus follows the phenomenological dogma of reducing the world of phenomena to abstracta in order to investigate the basic structure of experience in itself. Böhme, on the other hand, through the notion of ambience, seeks to conceptualize the importance of the *specific* world we encounter, but in the end, he too remains in the realm of abstract speculation through his main philosophical interest in issues of, for example, the notion of perception.²⁴ In dealing with an increasingly designed and aesthetically staged world, we need more precise concepts to discuss the structure of appearance. In relation to this, in a philosophical, cultural, and material context, design is important as a major means of structuring the appearance and the surface that signifies "world" in our perception and cognition. An example of an important design would be Swiss engineer-designer Hans Hilfiker's famous 1944 railway clock, which by emphasizing the importance of the *minute* as a "signum" for time's regularity sets the stage for a functional experience of time (Figure 1). The question, then, is how

19 Ibid., 121, 159–64. The Danish philosopher Carsten Friberg has written widely and comprehensively on these questions, see *Æstetiske erfaringer* (Copenhagen: Multivers, 2007) and (ed.) *Det æstetiskes aktualitet* (Copenhagen: Multivers, 2006).

20 See especially the essay "Synästhesien" in *Atmosphäre*, 85–98.

21 Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 35.

22 Böhme calls it "aesthetic economy," but in my opinion, the sociologically founded concept of experience economy is more powerful. See also Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2005).

23 In the words of Morten Kyndrup, *Den æstetiske relation* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2008), 102.

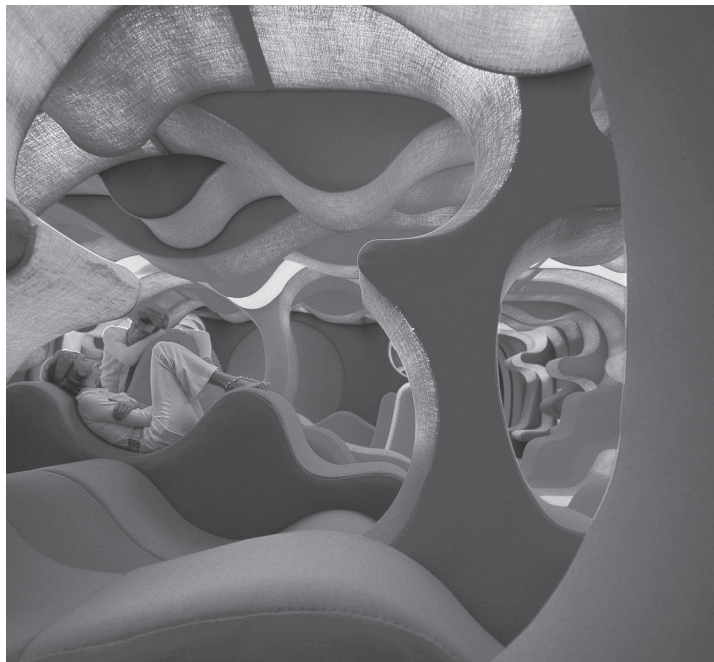
24 I thank Carsten Friberg for making me aware of this point.

- 25 This is not quite the same as, but does not exclude, the dogma of material culture studies of design as a “meaning-making process” that “encompasses the materialization of the physical world as a human project of creation”; Judy Attfield, *op. cit.*, 20. Whereas Attfield’s theory is sociologically founded in its focus on “the way people construct and interact with the modern material world through the practice of design and its objectification—the products of that process,” where design thus is conceived as “a practice of making meaning material” (*Ibid.* 12 and 42), my aim is to put emphasis on the implications in a phenomenological context for the meeting between subject and object, thus acknowledging the power of the specificity of the object.
- 26 For an elaborate introduction, see (with English text) Ida Engholm, *Verner Pantan* (Copenhagen: Aschehoug, 2005).
- 27 This was, interestingly, also the ambition of the historic functionalism in architecture, e.g. in the ideas of Le Corbusier, with the intention of, through the build environment, creating new conditions for living.

the world of (designed) objects in general influences the modality of the experiencing subject (i.e. the conditions of experience and how the objects’ contribution to experience can be analyzed).²⁵

As an example of a kind of design that creates an ambience and thus stages a certain kind of relation between subject and object, I point to the interior design created by the Danish designer Verner Pantan (1926–1998).²⁶ Interior design often evokes a high aesthetic effect of ambience because it is capable of creating an encapsulating and highly calculated environment. This is certainly the case in Pantan’s exhibition project *Visiona II* (1970, Figure 2), his interior design for Spiegel in Hamburg (1969, the basement swimming pool in Figure 3), and his home in Basel, Switzerland (the dining room in Figure 4). With the ambition of being a sort of surrealist—or rather psychedelic—*Gesamtkunstwerk* and seeking to suspend the normal coordinates of space, Pantan’s projects show design at its extreme, rethinking and reshaping our conception and perception of the environment.²⁷ Pantan’s interior designs work explicitly and intensely with founding constituents of ambience such as the powerful *color*, the texture, fabric and layers of *materials* and *surfaces* (especially materials that were new at Pantan’s time), and elements of *form* as variations of geometry. In this way, Pantan not only creates a certain ambient space that suspends the traditional organization of space; he intensifies this ambience. In the words of Martin Seel, Pantan’s spaces enable a kind of “aesthetic perception,” *ästhetische Wahrnehmung*, that not only invests itself in the immediate appearance—a key word for Seel—of the world, in the sense that the world is given to us as “a momentary and simultaneous abundance of appearance,” but also intensifies the appearance of the pure

Figure 2 (right)
Visiona II, exhibition project, 1970.
Design: Verner Pantan
Photo credit: Pantan Design



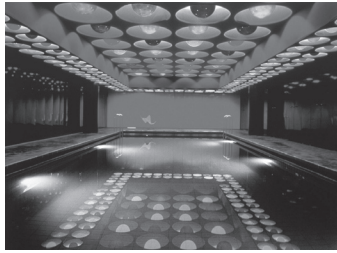


Figure 3 (above)
Interior design for the basement swimming pool in the Hamburg headquarter for the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, 1969.
Design: Verner Panton
Photo credit: Panton Design

Figure 4 (below)
Dining room in the home in Basel, Switzerland, 1985.
Design: Verner Panton
Photo credit: Panton Design

present that is otherwise inaccessible to ordinary perception.²⁸ Thus, to Seel, aesthetic perception is a matter of looking in a certain intent way that involves *attention for the play of appearances*. The focus is still on the given objects, which are simply seen in another way, that is, with an enhanced sense of the presence of the situation.²⁹ The point in this context is that Panton's design points reflectively to itself and urges a kind of "aesthetic perception," apparently "wanting" to be perceived with an enhanced sense of presence, of being in exactly this room, here and now, and achieving exactly this through "designerly" and sensuous means such as color, materials, and form. By combining these means into a whole, one can create not only ambience but also a reflective space that questions how space is perceived.

2. An Aesthetics of Communicative Self-reflection

Merleau-Ponty's second interlaced structure is also bound to concrete experience but has to do with the way in which every concrete, visible manifestation carries with it an invisible idea or meaning. He speaks of a bond "of the flesh and the idea, of the visible and the inner brace [*l'armature intérieure*] that the visible makes manifest and hides," meaning that the idea is not the contrary of the sensual but instead its *double* and its *depth*.³⁰ An additional point is that the idea, though always a part of the sensual, cannot reach the surface of direct manifestation; instead it operates as a "transparence behind the sensible."³¹ This idea paradoxically hides and displaces itself *as* it comes to manifestation. The radicalism in this dialectic of the sensual and the idea lies in the fact that Merleau-Ponty breaks with the metaphysic, post-platonic notion of the idea as something other-worldly or transcendent. According to Merleau-Ponty, the idea may be difficult to grasp, but it is always inherent in the sensual—as a structure of immanent transcendence.

It is this structure that I now wish to investigate in the context of aesthetics and design. In the same way that the sensuous relation of an appealing object and a sensitive subject can be called aesthetic, I wish to shed a light on the relationship between sensuous surface and incarnated idea to further our understanding of why some objects are regarded as aesthetic. That Merleau-Ponty's notion of incarnated ideas can be applied to design is obvious: every piece of design contains an idea, a dimension of immateriality; vice versa, design is only conceivable as something concretely manifested—when speaking of immaterial design, Merleau-Ponty's structure of interlaced meaning indicates that it is nothing without some sort of physical manifestation. The structure must, however, be elaborated if it is to contribute to the field of aesthetic knowledge. I consider this to be a matter of *communication*, that is, specifically, how the relation of manifestation/idea displays itself in design. Whereas the question up till now has been how design establishes a sensuous relation with a perceiving and experiencing subject, the question now relates to

28 Martin Seel, *Die Macht des Erscheinens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), 13.

29 *Ibid.*, 14. The same critique that can be raised against Böhme for only being interested in *how* something appears not *what* specifically also applies to Seel.

30 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 193.

31 *Ibid.*, 194.

the object itself, asking how the object in its sensual being points to a level of idea content or meaning, which, in a complex process of displacement, it simultaneously contains and conceals.³²

I consider this operation aesthetic in two ways. First, it unfolds through the sensual being of an object, which links it to the aesthetics of the sensual relation. Second, the relation of physical manifestation and idea, which can be more or less direct and more or less problematic, has also been a topic of modern, art-based aesthetic theory. The question has been how the work of art is constituted through a specific "form" that (un)reveals its meaning and/or resists understanding.³³ In the following, I will focus on this aspect under the heading of *aesthetic coding*, which examines how an object can not only attract attention and appeal to the senses (as in the sensual relation) but also be constituted in a way where it, in establishing a specific relation of physical manifestation/idea, demands or even commands a specific order of alignment or mode of understanding. It is clear, however, that every process of aesthetic "appreciation" implies a perceiving and aesthetically focused subject; nevertheless, at the same time, categories of aesthetically appealing objects—objects wanting to be perceived *as* aesthetic—can be separated from other objects. The Russian linguist Roman Jakobson speaks of a self-reflective "poetic function," which in focusing on the act of communication itself could be more or less activated within language, thus proposing "poetic language" to have a dominance of poetic function.³⁴ Thus, we can speak of objects with a high degree of "aestheticity," that is, with an implicit, communicative construction that points in this direction.³⁵ This question of how aesthetic objects communicate can be raised historically, as the process of conceiving aesthetic qualities varies throughout history and especially through the historical process of augmenting aesthetization.³⁶ However, my focus will be on some of the general constituents of aesthetically coded communication.

The Concept of Added Quality in Aesthetic Objects

How aesthetic objects contain something "more" has been a central topic of modern, art-based theory, from Schelling to Adorno. The ability to articulate this aspect has been one of the major benefits of this kind of theory and is far from obsolete today, although it may at one time have been too narrowly focused on art. Besides, it holds considerable potential for criticism of the operations and contexts of aesthetic phenomena—something that has been sorely neglected by the aesthetic theory directly related to design.³⁷

Thus, in his influential *Ästhetische Theorie*, Adorno discusses art as a medium that paradoxically is inevitably bound to the reality of the given (which, critically, for Adorno is necessarily problematic, as the given in its fundamental structures is negatively conceived as the result of an economic exchange that leads to human inauthenticity and a leveling of values), while at the same time having the

32 Thus, this way of conceptualizing meaning differs from Krippendorff's semantic theory, which doesn't explore the actual *kind* of expression of the meaning in depth.

33 C.f. a whole line of aesthetic theory on German ground: from Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* to Christoph Menke, *Die Souveränität der Kunst* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), Rüdiger Bubner, *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989), Karl-Heinz Bohrer, *Die Grenzen des Ästhetischen* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998), and Joachim Küpper & Christoph Menke (eds.), *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003).

34 See Roman Jakobson's seminal article: "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" In *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 350–77.

35 Morten Kyndrup, *Den æstetiske relation*, 102. With a reluctance to speak of aesthetics in design, Attfeld instead talks of "things with attitude" as a category of objects inherent of a self-awareness for envisaging change.

36 See to this Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991).

37 Böhme, for instance.

potential to transcend the given. Or, put another way: even though art must encompass a figuration of the "other" of the given, it must always be on basis of the given; as Adorno says, "the non-being in the works of art is a constellation of being."³⁸ Adorno is constantly trying to address this unresolved paradox, which in turn contributes to the everlasting energy of his work and demonstrates a structure of the aesthetic medium where, through its own means, it stands constantly on the verge of something else, the "other," the negation of the given. He says that "phantasy" cannot be "that cheap ability to escape being in proposing a non-being as if it existed"; instead it can transform "what the works of art always absorbed from being, into constellations, through which they become the other of being, is it also only through the specific negation of being."³⁹

A common feature of much aesthetic theory has been to conceptualize how art can represent or contain something that is otherwise unrepresentable or incomprehensible, thus functioning as a medium for an otherwise ungraspable surplus of meaning. Thus, for Adorno, art produces something "more," evoking a "Herstellung des Mehr." It produces its own transcendence of meaning that is not directly represented by the work of art but comes to expression as an otherness (*ein Anderes*) paradoxically conveyed by and separated from the structure of the work of art⁴⁰—in the same way that the work of art is both connected and opposed to the material structures of society. Following this line of thought, Martin Seel is also interested in the surplus of meaning that aesthetic objects can communicate, but he does not limit himself to the sphere of art, although art is often his main topic. With a focus on the function of human perception in the process of confronting something "other" in a surplus of meaning, Martin Seel claims that art's ability is to "bring forward otherwise unrepresentable circumstances." Art, in his view, has to do with:

...ways of human commitment in the real or the unreal, in conditions of the world in the past, the present, or the future. Ways of *meeting the world* [*Weltbegegnung*] are put forward, whereby ways of *meeting the meeting of the world* [*Arten der Begegnung mit Weltbegegnung*] will be possible.⁴¹

Further, this process of meeting ways of meeting the world is not tied to goal-oriented understanding but to a meeting *outside* the artwork *in* the human subjects themselves:

...objects of art are medium for an experience that takes place as a process of an understanding that isn't oriented towards a result of an understood.... Understanding art is more about an otherwise impossible meeting with otherwise impossible possibilities of perceiving ourselves.⁴²

As objects of everyday life, it may perhaps be difficult to see design in this context of an aesthetic negation of reality and proposals

38 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 204.

39 *Ibid.*, 258f.

40 *Ibid.*, 122.

41 Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* (München: Hanser, 2000), 184.

42 Seel, *Die Macht des Erscheinens*, 38.

of new models of understanding. Still, though, it is worth asking designed objects the difficult question concerning *how they define a relation to reality in the relation of physical manifestation/idea, and how they can be seen as mediums for meeting the world in new and/or reflective ways where new kinds of experience and of experiencing are evoked.*

In the case of Panton, the conceptual framework of inquiring about the aesthetics of communicative structures can lead to different levels of questions. First, it is obvious that for Panton, it is not enough to inquire about the sensual effects of ambience. One must also inquire about the idea content, which in this case has to do with proposing a utopian vision of new modes of being and living in and with design. In the historical and cultural context of the 1960s, Panton's design can be seen as a provocative response to a climate of increasing and pervasive cultural conformity with little room for alternative ways of living. In this broad ideological context, Panton's design, roughly speaking, proposes a new model for life. Second, we can ask how Panton's design proposes new orders of experiencing and meeting the world. Only by raising this question can we fully appreciate the radicalism of Panton's design: it not only *contains* a pure idea as a non-obliging experiment but *performs* and *executes* the utopian potential of this idea. Panton's design contains a strong and ideologically biased idea of living differently but only expresses this idea through a physical manifestation. In short, his design tries to lead us, "afford" us,⁴³ to live in new ways that could hardly be imagined *before* the realization and presentation of the design. In this sense, his design also encompasses a dimension of *performatively* implying an irreversibility of a "before" and "after"—the way we think of and experience design can never be quite the same again. Thus, it performs the new kind of being that it states on an ideological level. In and through its physical manifestation, Panton's design not only suggests an idea of living differently, it fundamentally challenges our very understanding of design.

Working with Aesthetics in Design

On an abstract level, we can ask a number of questions regarding design's relation to its content of meaning. I will argue that aesthetics in design is a matter of how design relates to meaning. It is not enough to ask *what* the meaning of a specific design is on a conceptual level (the "idea"), we must also ask *how it performs or reflects this meaning in its physical form*, and how it relates to the kind of *self-reflective "aesthetic function"* where it displays a surplus of meaning. In this way, discussing aesthetics in design is a way of consciously focusing on dimensions of meaning in design, but also, on behalf of the designers, on the *construction* of meaning. *How can a surplus of meaning be invested in design, and how can it be reflected in an actual piece of design?*

Panton points to one possible direction in allowing the basic idea to be so pervasive and effective in his design that it not only

43 As in James J. Gibson's concept of *affordance*, that is, the constrained possibilities for specific actions inherent in an environment or an object; see "The Theory of Affordances," in *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing*, eds. Robert Shaw and John Bransford, (New Jersey: Hillsdale, 1977). This notion has been especially productive, for e.g., HCI research, and leaves its traces in Donald A. Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) where it is used to investigate the "perceived and actual properties" of a thing that "determine just how the thing could possibly be used," 9.

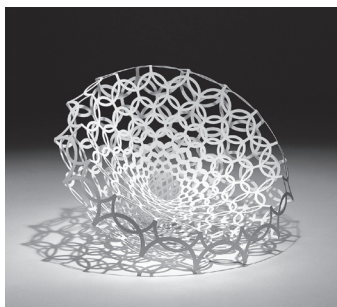
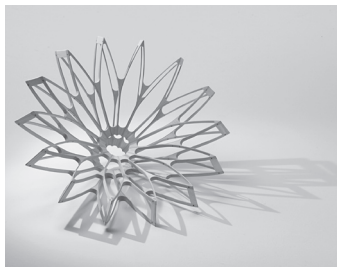


Figure 5 (top)
Honesty. One off chair in ash made through the joining of two identical, but differently scaled layers, 1999.
Design: Louise Campbell
Photo credit: Erik Brahl

Figure 6 (middle)
Bille goes Zen. One off chair in ash named after the cabinet maker Lars Bille Christensen, 2003. Design: Louise Campbell
Photo credit: Erik Brahl

Figure 7 (bottom)
Veryround. Sitting chair made in laser cut 2mm powder-coated steel sheet frame. The chair consists of 260 identical circles in different sizes.
Design: Louise Campbell
Photo credit: Zanotta

stands behind the sensual relation of creating an ambience but also produces a surplus of meaning on an ideological level of a different way of life. Another way of working with aesthetics is to maintain a surplus of meaning but have the idea be more indirectly mediated in the design, that is, less directly performed or displayed in the sense of implying a new overall structure of meaning through the design. This principle can be observed in a series of chairs by the Danish-English designer Louise Campbell (1970). Two of them are one-off chairs, *Honesty* (1999, Figure 5) and *Bille goes Zen* (2003, Figure 6); the third, *Veryround* (2006, Figure 7) is manufactured, in a limited number, by Zanotta, Italy.

Even though the materials vary (the first two are made in ash and the third in two-millimeter powder-coated steel sheet frame), all three chairs can be seen as mediators of the same principle. The construction is based on two identical but differently scaled circular layers centered around a focal point in the middle. Assembled, the two layers produce an expanded, three-dimensional circular structure that stands directly on the floor. Viewed as a continuous series, the chairs represent an ongoing meditation on—and a perfection of a principle of—construction where the latest, *Veryround*, stand as the current culmination. It is not only round in its overall outline but also on the level of detailing, compiled as it is by a total of 260 identical circular modules in different sizes.⁴⁴

Campbell's chairs represent a play with construction and form: the form does not rationally follow the functional aspects of being a chair made for sitting; instead, it follows the experimental principle of the two-circle structure. In this sense, the chairs are attempts at bringing a rather abstract idea to life. The idea, however, does not remain abstract but is (as with most design) sensuously laid out in concrete materials, demanding a place in actual space. Normally, the sensuous qualities of design produce the "extra" element of the design that is often regarded as "aesthetic." Here, of course, the designs are superbly executed and, in the case of the first two chairs, brilliantly handcrafted. But more than anything, it is the idea of the formal and non-functional principle of circularity that creates a surplus of meaning in this design.

As with Panton, the idea pervades and determines the design, and in both cases there is an almost perfect integration of idea and physical manifestation—the idea is only relevant in so far as it is "put to work," and the physical expression of form has hardly any relevance without an idea or meaning content. In my view, this is a hallmark of aesthetics in design. But where Panton's design reflectively points to the fact that there is some kind of idea operating in and through the design (clearly evident in the way his design, appealing directly and aggressively to the senses, performs the utopian idea of a different way of life), in Campbell's chairs the idea is a more subtle, pure form experiment. The idea, of course, is the overall formal and non-functional principle that determines the

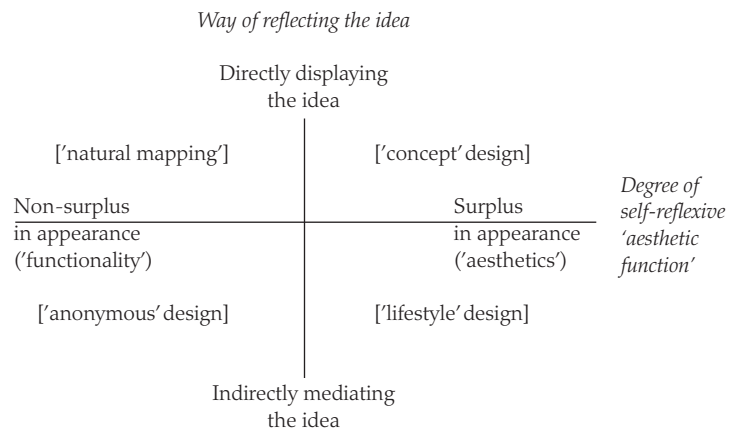
44 For a further description (in Danish), see Mads Nygaard Folkmann, Louise Campbell (Copenhagen: Aschehoug, 2007).

design; however, it simply works through the design and does not reflectively point to itself as “idea.”

This structure of investigating how an idea can be reflected in the design and how it can create a surplus of meaning (that is, the overall aesthetic question of *how* design relates to meaning on a general level) can not only be described in design, it can also be used more actively (by designers) as a tool of reflection in the design process.

In relating these two aspects of design as an aesthetics of communicative self-reflection, where the x-axis represents the relation to the “aesthetic function,” (that is, the degree of surplus of meaning in relation to functional qualities) and the y-axis represents the reflection of the idea, it is possible to see how different kinds of design communicate differently aesthetically. This coordinate system encompasses *different modes* of aesthetics:

Framework for conceiving aesthetics in design
as the formulation and construction of meaning



“functionality” is not opposed to “aesthetics” as such but according to the two axes has its own kind of aesthetics with a non-surplus in the appearance of the sensuous relation. Designs in this category include the purely functional design of everyday objects that may also reflect the idea content in different ways. At one end of the spectrum there is *anonymous* design, where we simply see through the inherent idea; at the other end of the spectrum there is the kind of *functional* design that displays its idea in a way that only reflects that there *is* an idea but which also, through this mechanism, often explains itself in a process of “natural mapping.”⁴⁵ Likewise, there can be (as I described in the cases of Pantoni and Campbell) different modes of aesthetics linked to a great surplus of meaning and appearance. At one end of the spectrum there is the purely conceptual design, which does not, however, entirely circumscribe the modality of Pantoni’s highly sensuous experiments, but which

45 See to this concept Donald A. Norman’s functionalist credo in *The Design of Everyday Things*: “Natural mapping, by which I mean taking advantage of physical analogies and cultural standards, leads to immediate understanding,” 23.

is prevalent when the conceptual aspect is formulated on the ideological level. The other end of the spectrum is where most “life style” design is found, a type of design that uses a high degree of outer appearance with a surplus of appeal to the users, or rather consumers, and where it is not important that the underlying idea is reflectively stated. Campbell’s design is more experimental than “life style” (even though *Veryground* does have its place in the international circulation of high-end furniture), but she operates with the same approach of indirectly putting the idea to work. The experimental focus of her series of chairs is to *challenge* the relation of idea and physical manifestation so that the idea does not take over but has the status of Merleau-Ponty’s inner structure, manifesting and hiding itself at the same time. In Campbell’s case, aesthetics in design is expressed as an ongoing dialogue of outer appearance, constantly hiding and revealing its meaning content.

In Conclusion: Aesthetic Challenges for Designers

The theoretical framework proposed here can be used in analyses and discussions of aesthetics in design, but it can also inform designers who need to deal practically with the challenges of the aesthetic in design. The two aspects of aesthetics in design that are put forward in this article—design as a structure of sensual appearance, and design as an act of communication that may contain an aesthetic coding that lets an idea or content of meaning be physically manifested and reflected in different ways—can lead to a more theoretically focused inclusion of aesthetic matters in the process of designing.

Thus, I will conclude by indicating how the questions raised in this article can be turned into a series of aesthetic challenges for designers. The first issue is the challenge to work consciously and strategically with the *sensuous* impact of design, that is, to draw specific attention to the nature and function of the sensual when designing. In this way, the concept of “ambience” can become an important addition to the toolbox of design methodology. Further, we may consider how an object can be designed to urge a kind of “enhanced perception.” This does not, however, necessarily mean that design needs to flash and mark itself as “design;” it can also be accomplished in the anonymous design of everyday objects through more subtle aesthetics and a more discreet appearance. However, it may prove productive to challenge the aim and scope of design and its means of creating an entire universe of sensuality, as demonstrated in the case of Panton’s design, where the power and importance of a sensual relation are achieved through designerly means.

On the level of *communicative self-reflection*, it is possible to raise a series of questions concerning the way in which design communicates and how it can be coded aesthetically in its construction of meaning. First of all, one may consider the kind and function of communication through the actual design—that is, what

“idea” the design should communicate, and how. Within this context, one may attempt to apply the model proposed in this article to the process of designing: the model can be used to clarify which degree and kind of aesthetic coding will be relevant for the actual design; it can clarify how the degree of surplus of meaning in relation to functional qualities (“aesthetic function”) relates to this key idea, and how this idea is reflected in the design. In sum, these instruments can be used as an aesthetic challenge to the conventional way of conceiving design and the means by which it is created, thus facilitating the overall development of designerly and practical means of addressing aesthetics in design.