

Design and Beauty:

material culture, decoration, concealment
and disclosure.

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Abstract

In the present paper we intend to ponder upon links between beauty and design within the practical application in a specific framework: (1) beauty as aesthetization strategy at the service of decoration and concealment; (2) beauty as individual disclosure in nowadays society; (3) design as calibrating both mentioned perspectives. The primary issue emerging regards the definition of beauty. What is beauty? And what is the relation between beauty and design? The emotionally compelling, colorful, round and redundant products? Or does it regard the element of strict necessity, the product qualifying its function and efficacy?

In point (1) we will elaborate on how the history of design relates to form as surface, to ornament, decoration and concealment. Taking as a point of departure August Endell (1871-1925), who advocated the power of form upon the mind and feelings, emphasizing the importance of a new style in applied arts (and in architecture) to reveal the beginning of a new era (Art Nouveau) that constrains the individual through a stylish, decorative environment. After focusing on the criticism of Modernism, which equated beauty with functionality and sobriety rather than with style, and discussing Adorno's criticism of this too simple equation, we will continue to review the criticisms that associate the production of beautiful thing with the logic of a consumerist society. We will then debate the Memphis group as its production disregarding the plain 'functional', 'rational', 'pure', 'abstract' justification standards for 'useful' objects. These

objects incorporate unconventional, irreverent lines and vibrant, intense colors. Decoration is not auxiliary but instead essential to define the object's specificity. Memphis affords decoration a structuring role and the beauty of an object is deemed to be a result of its visual and sensory impact rather than from functionality.

In point (2) we will reassume the discussion of point 1, displaying how the 'old' debate between the 'technical perfection' – beauty as a result of functionality – and 'form perfection' – beauty as a result of appearance – still makes sense nowadays but transformed by the concept of 'individual disclosure'. The designed objects are intended to allow the communication of a personal 'self' through the use of things. Still functionality is present – a thing needs to function –, still form is present – a thing should be pleasant, even beautiful – but within a more complex context: the qualification of the self. Among other examples, we will focus on the detailed, sophisticated, intelligent, elegant, light, user-friendly iphone! Two very different theories arise from this contemporaneous debate: the one that we can identify with Carmagnola's analysis which supports the thesis that beauty is submitted to the principles of an economy of fiction, simulation and simulacrum. The designer designs 'promises' of freedom that are nothing else but alienation, answering to the objectives of consumerism and profit. The other one, more optimistic, relies on the belief of the pleasure-based approach (Jourdan) in design.

'Since the beginning of time humans have sought pleasure. We have gained pleasure from the natural environment (...). Another source of pleasure has been the artefacts with which we have surrounded ourselves.' [1]

In point (3) we are interested in situate the 'today's design' among the inheritances of the past. Therefore we will discuss how material culture – functional and beauty – can open to the possibility of freedom instead of retreating to alienation (Norman, Csikszentmihalyi, Miller) The idea of disclosing the personal being (existence) through the choice and combination of things with meaning for 'myself' (things brought from trips abroad, with family inheritances, with Ikea objects, with the cyber world facilities...) allow us to propose a design that can lead to a balance between an artefact and an artefact with personal meaning.

Beauty as aesthetization strategy: designing a form

What is beauty?

'Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed (...)' [2],

states Roger Scruton in the introduction to his book *Beauty*. There are however different kinds of beauty. H.P. Berlage for instance differentiated between a 'feminine' beauty, that would rather be about prettiness and comfort, and a 'masculine' one, that is about power and cutting edge. [3] For Theodor Adorno there is a historical development to the perception of beauty. In the mid 20th century, he stated, beauty could no longer be equated with the simple and innocent pleasantness of nature:

"Beauty today can have no other measure except the depth to which a work

resolves contradictions.” [4]

For both Berlage and Adorno, modern art and architecture should face up to the challenges of the age and confront rather than conceal anxieties brought about by modernity.

It is interesting to frame the history of design within these tensions. The history of design inevitably relates to form as surface, to ornament, decoration and concealment. If we take as a point of departure August Endell (1871-1925), who wasn't a designer, we face a kind of thinking that is present in all discussions about design: the power of form. Endell advocates the strong influence of the form upon the mind and feelings. The visual experiences lead to a diversity of aesthetical appreciation that delivers different meanings to a designed thing. So, emphasizing the importance of a new style in applied arts (and in architecture), Endell reveals the beginning of a new era (Art Nouveau) that involves the individual in a stylish, decorative environment which influences a way of living.

However, for people like Adolf Loos, ornament and decoration are to be banned from design in the first decades of the 20th century. The metaphor of the machine speaks also about a new beginning but this time centered in the mechanical prodigious and the beauty of the things mechanically produced. Indeed, Modernism is related with the equation of beauty with functionality and sobriety rather than with style as the application of a certain set of ornamental principles. The principles of Bauhaus and of Hochschule für Gestaltung of Ulm are widely known to be repeated once again. We allow ourselves to recall the arguments of Max Bill when defending that a product must be beautiful and that that beauty must occur from the technical perfection. The individuals have a desire for beauty and design should allow such beauty, applying the conditions of producing a beautiful, efficient, economic, simple product as Max Bill would stress. For Adorno form stemming from functionality was essential for though not equivalent to beauty, since he required works of art to point also towards future potentials of emancipation, which are not yet part of recognized 'functions'. For him therefore design products that would lack this 'critical' aspect, would be no more than commercially justified things, which relied upon a falsified sense of beauty.

Continuing to review the criticisms that associate the production of beautiful things with the logic of a consumerist society, we face the post-modernist practice that arises in Italy with groups like Memphis or Alchimia which intend to overcome the functionalist and industrial corset through a more experimental, symbolic and poetic language. Picking Memphis group as an example, we are confronted with a production disregarding the plain 'functional', 'rational', 'pure', 'abstract' justification standards for 'useful' objects. These objects incorporate unconventional, irreverent lines and vibrant, intense colors. Decoration is not auxiliary but instead essential to define the object's specificity. Memphis affords decoration a structuring role and the beauty of an object is deemed to be a result of its visual and sensory impact rather than from functionality.



Figure 1 – Karl Lagerfeld apartment Montecarlo. [Copyright: Mode&Wohnen]

But, an object of design needs to function. An object of design is not made for pure contemplation like a work of art. About the question of the importance of beauty in design may be it can be put in these terms: is there aesthetical perfection because there is technical perfection or is there aesthetical perfection because form as form is taken as purpose?

Looking at the history of design, the first hypothesis is the most defended: beauty results from a global internal coherence of all functions, including the aesthetical function. Beauty is the result of such coherence. Indeed from the perspective of the practical world of design, from the *modus operandi* that transforms purposes, problems and ideas in a material realization, i.e. in a solution, beauty is not anymore a philosophical issue like for Scruton or Adorno, but an issue in relation with the design's project. That's what underlines André Ricard (industrial designer, professor, interested writer in design themes) when proposing a synthesis between operational perfection and aesthetical perfection:

- a) that each useful object tends, by its own evolutive logic, to a total perfection, to its climax;
- b) that this climax is achieved when the saturation of its efficacy is accomplished through a maximal economy of means;
- c) that that goal is only possible when there is an optimal internal and external coherence of the object;
- d) that that coherence just can be facilitated when an adequate concordance among all the considered elements exists;
- e) that when all of that is achieved, also beauty will be reached. [5]

Hereby, one project of André Ricard in which both operational perfection and aesthetical perfection are represented.

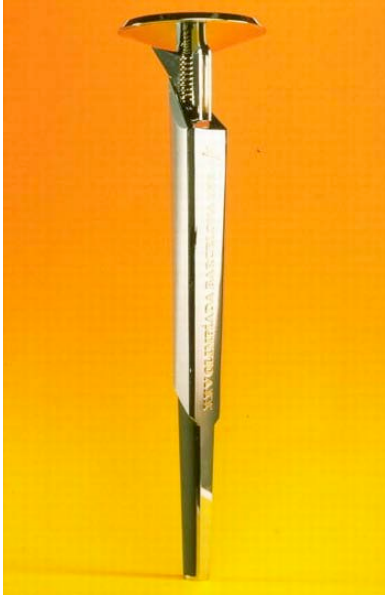


Figure 2 – André Ricard,, the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympic Games Torch. The torch is in the IOC, Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland. Caption: XXV Olimpiada Barcelona 1992 on the handle with the Games emblem. [Copyright: Getty Images]

Beauty from the point of view of the design project is stated by Ricard (as an example of a designer who thinks about the designing practice) as an outcome of the projectual act, solving the traditional opposition form/content, external/internal, appearance/essence, contemplation/use, beautiful/useful. The aesthetical formalism has no more sense as well as the technical rationalism or the efficient functionalism. The aesthetical function is integrated in the designing act and should not be neglected nor extremely valued.

Beauty as individual disclosure: designing for you

In effect, we will discuss how the ‘old’ debate between the ‘technical perfection’, i.e. beauty as a result of functionality, and ‘form perfection’, i.e. beauty as a result of appearance, is transformed by the concept of ‘individual disclosure’. The designed objects are intended to allow the communication of a personal ‘self’ through the use of things. Still functionality is present – a thing needs to function –, still form is present – a thing should be pleasant, even beautiful – but within a more complex context: the qualification of the self.

Authors such as Deyan Sudjic, Patrick Jourdan, Donald Norman stress how design, being a way of seeing and constructing the world, is all around us and by that seduces, pleases, interests, influences, inspires and participates as much as in the image that the individual develops about him/herself as well as the image the individual wishes to transmit to the world.

Sudjic in *Cult Objects* [6], stating that each object tells a story, distinguishes the cult objects, i.e. the objects that seduce particularly and awake the desire of possession and ‘exhibition’. In general publicity manages to replace objects at a very quick pace. Even the so-called cult objects. In effect, a cult object doesn’t mean to be connected to a long-

life object. Its life can be short! During a certain time, the cult object is an element of communication of a certain message till it gets old and is replaced by a new cult object.

‘If you can persuade people to buy a tape recorder that doesn’t record, and that is only intelligible through headphones, then you can clearly persuade them to buy anything. Having performed the trick once, Sony have been able to go on capitalizing on the success of the Walkman, most notably with the ‘sports’ model, finished in deep-sea-diver yellow, and set off with squishy rubber-covered controls.’ [7]

In effect, the cult objects have some characteristics of design that evoke a certain emotional answer in some type of individuals. Another example among a long list, the Mini (car) had also some particular features which seem to have been pondered in order to provoke a certain emotional attitude. And the Anglepoise lamp, a William Morris textile, an antique piece of porcelain Vista Alegre, Calvin Klein...and finally all kind of ‘exquisite’ trends announced by publicity as signs that tell something about who uses them.

And if we focus on the detailed, sophisticated, intelligent, elegant, light, user-friendly iPhone? Marketing makes of it one of the most desirable cult objects to accompany you in the daily life. A cult object that through its successive upgrading makes the old versions obsolete. A cult object that seduces the user by offering not only more (eventually) friendly, intuitive, easy... functions but also the prestigious sensation of belonging to the ‘happy-users-club’ of the last model. Of course, such absolutely fantastic object (almost a subject in itself) will be – hélas! – replaced by a new version as soon as possible.



Figure 3 – iPhone. [Copyright: unknown]

However, there’s no cult object without user’s praise of it. The iPhone receives an impressive list of compliments either for its operational perfection or for its aesthetical perfection. Moreover, this *object-subject* allows easy, smooth, quick emotional contact with the user’s loved ones or with any issue of the internet.

Two very different theories arise from the contemporaneous debate about the impact of marketing in creating and exploiting consumer’s desire: the one, more optimistic, relies on the belief that things being designed upon the concept of pleasure are allowing a kind of fulfillment of human desire. Individuals recognize themselves through objects and communicate also through the use, the exhibition of their things. In effect,

‘human factors have come to increased prominence in recent years. This is manifest in a number of ways: one is the ever expanding literature relating to human-factors issues, including books and journals, and even magazine and newspaper articles; another is the number of international conferences and seminars dedicated to human-factors issues. (...) However, perhaps the most important reflection on how seriously human-factors issues are now being taken is the sharp increase in human-factors professionals employed in industry.’ [8]

Among all the human factors that a designer must take in consideration the affordance *pleasure* is becoming the one that makes the difference in the choice between two products. Of course, if a product doesn’t perform the task for which it was intended it provokes dissatisfaction. Jourdan call functionality to the first level of consumer needs. The second level is usability: people expect that a product not only functions but that it’s easy to use. More and more people have the experience of products that function well and then, they expect friendly usability. The third level is pleasure. Having satisfaction with products that function and are easy to use, people want products that have something extra; products that can be related to them, that can tell partly of their story, products that bring emotional compensations. And according to Jourdan this is the present new challenge for human factors issues when considering design. The usability-based approaches to design should be completed with the pleasure-based approaches. People wish that products may bring pleasure to them and that they can benefit from it.

‘Since the beginning of time humans have sought pleasure. We have gained pleasure from the natural environment: from the beauty of flowers or the feeling of the sun on our skin; from bathing in soothing waters or the refreshment of a cool breeze. We have actively sought pleasure, creating activities and pastimes to stretch our mental and physical capabilities or to express our creative capabilities (...). Another source of pleasure has been the artefacts with which we have surrounded ourselves.’ [9]

In the book *The Pursuit of Pleasure* [10] Lionel Tiger, a Canadian anthropologist, outlines four type of pleasures: physical, social, psychological and ideological. Tiger’s study is the base of Jourdan’s explanation of each pleasure’s component in the framework of product design.

In the context of our text, Jourdan’s theory stresses our statement that indeed the ‘old’ debate between the ‘technical perfection’ and ‘form perfection’ is transformed by the importance of people’s experiencing pleasure when experiencing the use of a product. *Individual disclosure* is the name we give to that ‘concern’ in product creation process. If Jourdan’s ‘positive’ conceptualisation of beauty and pleasure is close to that of Scruton, there is another theoretical perspective that continues the ‘critical’ lineage of Adorno. Fulvio Carmagnola would definitely belong to this lineage. His analysis supports the thesis that beauty is submitted to the principles of an economy of fiction, simulation and simulacrum. The designer designs ‘promises’ of freedom that are nothing else but alienation, answering to the objectives of consumerism and profit. In *Design, la fabbrica del desiderio* [11], Carmagnola interprets design through the concept of desire, showing how design is related with the human being welfare. Gillo Dorfles in that book’s introduction uses the expression *in-der-Welt-sein* to stress that design is present in all daily life acts, because it is ‘glued’ to the existential, economic

and anthropological situation of the individual. However, Carmagnola warns that the designed object is captive of the market rules and of the economic interests. Based upon these principles, desire is propagated as a continuously not satisfied desire, that obliges to jump from an object to another, obeying to the objectives of a society ruled by a king of imaginary that has nothing of liberator. On the opposite, such imaginary is built up by the protagonists that profit from a non critical consumerism. The imaginary empties itself of any symbolic meaning and fills itself of the eternal desire of possessing constantly the 'new'. The object of design loses also any ethic and poetic value, becoming a merchandise that obeys to the commercial efficiency laws, becoming the protagonist of a desire constructed by the superficial and apparent universe of the *media*. Then, beauty in design is not a value with symbolic and cultural meaning, but it is just a stimulus to push further the economy that Carmagnola calls the *economia finzionale* (economy of fiction, economy of dissimulation).

That form is the confluence of a synergic ensemble of structuring elements, namely technological, economic, ecologic, ergonomic, cultural, aesthetical... seems to be consensual. That design has strong responsibilities in shaping the world seems also not to be polemic. Design designs homes, public spaces, work environments, hobby environments, external spaces, interior spaces, transport systems, communicational systems, simple artefacts, sophisticated ones... objects and contexts which are expression of more fantasy or of more high technology. These objects, contexts, environments, systems... are expression of either a way of living or of possibilities of ways of living. Our question is the following: is such diversity dominated in absolute by the laws of the market and by the targets of a blind consumerism? If the answer is affirmative, then, the individual has no opportunity for interpretations, choices or meaning giving. Beauty as expression of an aesthetical appeal would be an artifice to manipulate the preferences of the user/consumer/individual. Even the research on pleasure-based design would be based on the goal of finding consumers' typologies in order to manipulate their wishes, desires, values and lifestyles. Finally human-factors issues studies would have as first priority to serve sales and profits. Aesthetic affordances would also be nothing else than a pretext for manipulating that 'weakness' that some people have of buying/possessing what has a sensitive appeal mixed with a symbolic status impact. In that case, individuals are absolutely predictable and the challenge of human-factors specialists and designers is to gather information about human behaviour.

Material culture and freedom: you choosing design

Recalling the conference topic within we intend to contribute with our text – vertigo: envisioning what's ahead, calibrating past inheritances –, we will now focus on the argument how material culture can open to the possibility of freedom instead of retreating to manipulation and alienation. Donald Norman founder of The Cognitive Science Society considers in *Emotional design. Why we love (or hate) everyday things* [12] the role of emotion in the choice and purchase of certain products. Based on the 'theory of the 3 levels' (affection, behaviour and cognition) he intends to present a comprehension of the design process, as well as reflect about the emotional dimension of the products over the individuals. Therefore, the decision to buy this or that product depends on a cognitive act in interaction with affections and emotions that could be the strongest argument to buy or reject the thing. Research on the field of cognition and

emotion show that more attractive objects exercise a more powerful seduction, as well as objects that evoke an answer more sentimental, individual, namely nostalgia, memories, auto-image, pleasure. In this work, Norman focuses on what he defines as the 'history of interaction' between the individual and the objects, stressing the driving force of the emotions as reflex of individual experiences. Emotion and beauty, then, are not necessarily associated, because it is possible to choose 'ugly' objects, even kitsch, in preference to 'beautiful' objects. The sentimental reasons and the aesthetical reasons perform diverse functions in the impact that an object has in an individual.

The idea of disclosing the personal being (existence) through the choice and combination of things with meaning for 'myself' (things brought from trips abroad, with family inheritances, with Ikea objects, with the cyber world facilities...) allow us to propose a design that can lead to a balance between an artefact and an artefact with personal meaning. We should recognize as a fact that the individual looks for aesthetical solutions for daily life. The individual is not invested in the objects that occupy his or her surroundings or that are discarded from it. In 'old time' objects were rare and eternal. Today they are rather ephemeral and passing. A nostalgic feeling in such statement? Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton in the work *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* [13] develops an empirical study on the meaning of things to people, based on interviews to 315 people belonging to 82 families with different backgrounds living in Chicago and Evanston (Illinois). People were asked what objects were special to each of them and why. After analysing the answers about the meanings of household objects, the authors conclude the following:

'we found that each home contained a symbolic ecology, a network of objects that referred to meanings that gave sense to the lives of those who dwelt there.(...) To be effective in conveying meanings, the owner had to be personally involved with the artefact. It was not enough that the object had been created by someone else, to be significant, the owner had to enter into an active symbolic relationship with it.'[14]

According to this study, people find and attribute meaning to objects which have a particular resonance in their own lives, usually a resonance inseparable of emotions and feelings.



Figure 4 – A Room with personal belongings. [Copyright: unknown]

In the article ‘Homes from Home: Memories and Projections [15], the author stresses how homemaking is a phenomenon that crosses the lifetime cycle of the individuals in the different moments they go through. The parents’ home (the childhood home), the starting living by his/her own, the home made through marriage (or living together), the home broken by divorce, the remake of a new home... are a concentration of materials (objects and objects related practices) and projections of emotions.

‘Reinventing home is an ongoing process of linking the present to the past and the future. It entails not only remembering past homes but also projecting future homes. Away from home, whether travelling, migrating or living in lodgings, one becomes more aware of the meaning of the home one has left behind, temporarily or for good.’ [16]

The following image illustrates a home decorated with objects brought by the two members who decided to share a place and make of it a home. Style is not the reason of such decoration, but the need of being surrounded by objects that evoke memories of loved ones or of life experiences.

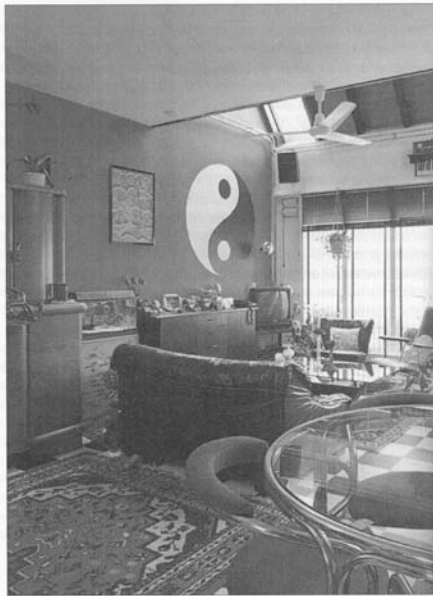


Figure 5 – The reinvention of a shared home, Gouda, 1996. [Copyright: Martin Droog]

This understanding is consistent with recent sociological studies which describe practices of inhabitation as a form of “appropriation.” Daniel Miller, for instance, has developed a theory of consumption in which he states that consumption practices (for example, those related to the decoration of the home) basically have to do with the struggle to appropriate good and services made in abstract, alienable circumstances, in order to transform them into something that is contributing to the construction of the self [17]. This theory has been the basis for a series of ethnographic studies that focus on the material culture of daily life. In those studies, the home is shown to have multiple significances. It can be read as a symbolic container expressing the identities of its inhabitants as well as conveying more general cultural assumptions and beliefs about the world. At the same time, however, there are many conflicts between the agency

expressed by individuals, by the family, the household, and by the material structure of the house itself. Individuals occupy houses, as Miller states, but houses also occupy individuals. He thus acknowledges that

“the home itself is both a site of agency and a site of mobility, rather than simply a kind of symbolic system that acts as the backdrop or blueprint for practice and agency.” [18]

Design objects are thus part of multiple logics, those that pre-occupy the designer (Ricard) and the manufacturer (Carmagnola) as well as those that inhabit the private lives and spaces of individuals who buy them, receive them, share them, inherit them or discard them (Cieraad). Their beauty is situated within these multiple logics, answering to different regimes and bridging past, present and future while doing so. ‘Today’s design’ in its awareness of disclosing the personal being within the complexity we discussed in our text, leads to a constant (desirable) balance between an artefact as such and an artefact that opens to freedom and not to alienation. Beauty, which cannot be subsumed under a one-linear definition that serves design (or better, designers), is, however, an intrinsic reference of the projecting act and then, an intrinsic reference for material culture.

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