

1.

Addressing the essential of design as the call asks for is a daring task for two reasons: it is simply a large question to answer and I would suggest it is not possible to be answered in a format fit for a single conference contribution, if it is possible to answer appropriately at all. The other reason is personal: I am not a designer but come from a philosophical tradition. My challenge then is to avoid banalities about design as well as ending with what looks like a mess of philosophical abstractions.

Philosophers sometimes have a reputation of messing up things. Famously this occurs in the Socratic dialogues of Plato that begin with someone claiming to know something and Socrates happily asking about it as he wants to learn; in the end he concludes there was no genuine knowledge. Nevertheless we did learn something; we learned that the assumed knowledge in the beginning did not stand critical questions and was proven wrong – this is what we often take as a progression in knowledge. We are familiar with such discussions and we can say they have an analytical-scholastic form where assumptions are offered for debate to be disputed – in medieval thinking this is the model of *quastio et disputatio*. More contemporarily we could call it ‘present and defend’ or perhaps modify that and say it is about verification and falsification.

More interestingly, we also learned about the difficulties with the assumed knowledge in question. Knowledge implies a line of questions such as what it is we want to know, how we acquire that knowledge, what sort of questions are the right questions to ask and what we, in the end, will acknowledge as knowledge. Such questions belong to the philosophical aspect of the discourse and will probably not lead to an answer to the initial question, but, and this is what may be seen as messing things up, to discussing what would be a way of approaching the question also to avoid questions that in the end turns out to be the wrong questions to ask.

So, perhaps I will mess up things, but mess should not be the worst problem for designers. Besides, I could perhaps say a philosophical mess has similarities to saying that the designer should not give the client what the client asks for but what the client did not know to ask for.

My interest in the following is hence to approach this question about the essential of design by reflecting on how to approach it. Here, I do have a guideline, the one coming from the call asking about the “wow”-element, about the aesthetic quality. So how do we address that particular aspect of design to approach the essential – or more modest one essential – of design?

While I am not a designer I do have a particular relation to it. I am a user of design! Plato points at how the one having knowledge about something we produce is not the one producing it but the user (*Republic* 601 d-e). The ship builder knows how to build the ship, but it is the officer on the ship who knows whether it has been built well.

So my point of focus will be the essential of design from the perspective of the user with respect to the aesthetic quality. And to anticipate my conclusion I suggest design is essentially communicating to the user

and the designer should, or perhaps must, display sensibility towards the user. To acquire and show sensibility is, and this is a key assumption I hold, the essential of aesthetics, and I combine design and aesthetics in this aspect.

2.

The essential character of design invites an immediate reaction, namely the attempt to define design. Such definitions are often very open, open enough to include almost anything manmade whether physical objects or organisations, or the definitions become too narrow and immediately stir up disagreement debate. An all-inclusive definition such as to say design “stripped to its essence, can be defined as the human capacity to shape and make our environment in ways without precedent in nature, to serve our needs and give meaning to our lives” (Heskett 2002, 7) includes in design anything that is not nature and becomes too abstract to really tell us anything. Further, Heskett has to go through the history and development of design from the Stone Age and on to enable us to see what is relevant for discussions today (Heskett 2002, 13 ff.).

But, on the other hand, a narrow definition will easily be too controversial. Besides, beginning with definitions is more of an analytical-scholastic approach than the one I take where definition is something to approach rather than begin with. Furthermore, the call does ask us not to address the question of ‘what is design’.

When I am a user of design what exactly is it I use? It makes little sense to say I use design. I use objects. I use the fork in my hand and the smartphone in whatever form they have though some forms will simply be of better use than others. If this is where we start we may also easily find ourselves on a road that is perhaps dangerous, one of saying design is something in between me and the object. Following a model of different forms of design in Golsby-Smith’s “Fourth Order Design” (1996), design can be perceived to add value to the artefact “to improve the shape of the product, and its fit with the world” (p. 6). This sounds very classical and is also what I call a dangerous approach because design becomes something external to the object – it becomes an element in between the user and the object as if we can separate these three, and it becomes easily a discussion of what makes us appreciate one fork or smartphone from another because it has some sensorial appealing features or integrates well into an idea of how things should look to us, into a particular style.

Though it would be interesting to follow Golsby-Smith to other orders of design beyond only objects I will stick to the call’s focus on objects to emphasise an interest in one aspect of design. That is how design is something in between me and objects establishing and affecting that relation. Talking of design as “in between” causes concern for falsely implying there is a separation and that design is added to the artefact to make it appealing and easy to use. I will argue that design is not added and that it is not a third element to be separated from me and the object. I will rather look in a different direction and ask if it is sufficient to say that we make the artefacts we use to help us create acts, events and situations, or if the artefacts make the intentions we have and form the acts we are involved in. My answer is it is more of the latter than the former, and it is here design plays an essential role.

To clarify this I will make a digression and ask: is our hand using a tool to do something by use of the hand or is the hand using the tool instead of the hand? In other words: is the tool an extension or an exclusion of the hand? I take this question from a discussion about the phenomenology of the hand related to a discussion about technology and philosophical anthropology (Lysemose, 2013, 92 ff.). The reason for this digression is to emphasise the importance of the relation between us and objects and design as important for forming this exact relation.'

So what is the point here? If the tool is something we use to help us in our work we can see it as an extension of our organs. I wish to reach the fruit and I pick up a stick to help me; I wish to sketch something and I find using the finger in the sand is less efficient than the charred stick on a smooth surface. So far what I do is without doubt an intelligent act though not one specifically human as also some animals can do the same; they can even modify their tools like adjusting a spine to improve it for its purpose. The tool in our hand, or the spine in the beak of the bird, extends our organs and becomes like a prosthesis. Our handling of the tools may disappear from our attention as the act we exercise is usually performed better with attention directed towards the act and not the tool which is how the experienced user acts. If I am in the carpenter's workshop I may ask for explanations about many tools and I will be very focused on the tool in my hand as I feel it as an alien thing I have no intimate relation to in use. In contrast, the carpenter pays attention to the piece of wood the tool (as an extension of the hand) is used on i.e. to the act. I need exercise and as the conclusion to these exercises the tool may largely disappear. As long as I am focused on the notes and where on the piano's keyboard I place my fingers the music is more like a sequence of tones, but after practicing the attention is not on looking, finding and controlling the movements of the hands but on what becomes music.

Question is whether the use of the tool is the full picture of what happens or if what happens is that the tool now substitutes my hand. If the example is the charred stick, I use the tool but I also quickly learn I can make sketches and write letters with this tool in a way more refined than just with the finger on a soft surface. And soon the charred stick also becomes a more refined tool for drawing and writing perhaps, in the end, ending with a computer and different programmes. Are we then still talking about tools we use as extension or are we using the tools instead of our hand? The tool now enables us to do things we could not have done without them. As a digression within this digression it can perhaps become even clearer when the tools or other artefacts stop having the function they were originally intended for, like when we start fooling around with something for no particular purpose such as juggling with the tools. It is no longer a tool then but becomes an object of attention in itself and can lead to a different use of its own. The practical form of the ball for different purposes allows playful sports.

We now approach my starting point of asking if we use tools solely for helping us or if they in return form what we can do and further what we can think of doing. Different philosophical reflections have approached this question, especially related to modern technology. Thus Hannah Arendt comments on how the difference between old machines imitating nature in their use of water and wind providing us with forces similar to but stronger than what humans can manage, and the new machines like the steam engine that transforms nature into a resource for energy production which denaturalises nature (Arendt, 1998, 148 ff.). It is now the coal and not the perceived force of nature we care for. Martin Heidegger has a similar point about how the water with the power to turn the mills' wheel becomes water turning the turbines to

produce electricity, hence the water is a store of power we can use for anything and nature is likewise denaturalised in our interpretation of the world (Heidegger, 1996).

If we move from these 1950's philosophical reflections to something more recent we can find them again in relation to design concerning how we are 'enslaved' to machines as Dunne phrases it with respect to Paul Virilio: "This enslavement is not, strictly speaking, to machines, nor to the people who build and own them, but to the conceptual models, values, and systems of thought the machines embody" (Dunne, 2005, 21). We are here invited to reflect on how we are formed by the environment when we use technologies that embody particular world-interpretations hence also ideologies. This can lead to critical discussions and critical design which I will leave for another occasion. Instead I make again use of the assumption addressed before of the impossibility of separating me, the object and the design when objects embody particular interpretations, like viewing nature as resource, and engage us in these interpretations with their values while we use them. The objects then are important for forming our relation to the environment; the objects educate us (Friberg, 2017).

I will suggest design is here essential for the relation I have to objects, the objects that "are a crucial expression of ideas of how we could or should live, put into tangible form" (Heskett, 2002, 56). What becomes essential here is to connect me and the artefact in broadest possible sense. I wish to place design in this connecting act without which the artefact loses its value and meaning for me. Furthermore, I will characterise this connection as a communication when we understand communication to include more than propositional statements and verbal expressions; we also communicate through gestures and objects. Communication is to share and make something common. This communicative act invites me to engage with something especially by being friendly to me as a user hence it is responsible for the enslavement mentioned above as it is provided by 'interactive user-friendliness' (Dunne, 2005, 21) that conceals the processes of making us servants of a particular set of actions in a form of communication we feel is at our service. To design is to occupy a moral position we should say with Vial (2010, 51). A new digression on morals and politics opens up, but I believe we can leave it to only recognise it is implicitly present in the next step.

3.

I will now pick up what has been left, the question in the call about acknowledging aesthetic quality and how to acknowledge it as something more than a "wow" element in design for satisfying a certain aesthetic attitude or consumer response – sometimes two sides of the same question.

Returning to our object, we may ask: Do I like it? Can I use it? How is the quality? Three questions that may largely cover what we think about something we intend to use – three points prominently present in such discussions since Vitruvius introduced them and we have learned to know them in his language: *venustas*, *utilitas* and *firmitas*. We ask the questions of the object, but we can also reverse this and say the object intended for our use addresses us in these three different ways. The object is made for something, like it is for eating in a specific manner or for communicating with other people at a distance, but there are more ways to serve these functions and now the object must appeal to us and make us chose it, relate to it and enable us to handle it, which I find are essential tasks for design.

Following what I said before, it is design that has to answer these questions being the connecting and communicating aspect of the object. Taking design as communicating we should view the essential of design in relation to rhetoric.

Rhetoric is about speaking well which implies the use and trustworthiness of the speech, the *utilitas* and *firmitas* as well as the style making it a beautiful speech, *venustas*. Contrary to popular belief, rhetoric is not about persuading through any means including manipulation, it is about creating adherence and consent by addressing the audience in appropriate ways (Perelman, 1997, 35 ff.). Obviously what is implied in 'appropriate' is subject to controversies and it has no simple answer. I will come back to as it is a central element in design; for now I will return to the aesthetic quality which relates to a tradition where elegance and beauty are not matters of mere appearance but reflect manners. We can talk of the beautiful soul which is a mode of moral judgement that finds its expression in how this soul makes itself apparent in the social life, in what we will know as *il bel parlare* and *bel esprit*. This opens for yet another digression into cultural history and related ideas not to be addressed here; I will only ask to keep in mind how a Western tradition has combined performances and order in an understanding of morality and beauty. To know what to say and how to act well in a specific situation is to perform as educated, hence being of a good moral character which is to show delicate taste – a sign of a beautiful soul.

Even though this relation of order and beauty belongs to an understanding from past ages, in brief called metaphysics, we still carry much of this with us. If we have difficulties in talking about an order, especially in the singular, we still view things based on certain ideals determining our preferences. Such ideals are not given but to be learned and they differ and we easily end in quarrels about taste because of what we each hold to be the rights ideals. What shows good taste and what is kitsch is a matter of such ideals, and even if we may not see good taste as a sign of a beautiful soul we may judge the person of good taste to be of a certain education which can then be seen as one similar to ours sharing our views. If our taste differs we may consider the other as uneducated or a snob – and the moral judgement is perhaps not that far away then.

Taste and aesthetic quality are not something to deal with in a few sentences. I began with relating it to the question of liking something; often aesthetics is about an appreciation of something, of something pleasing us. However, we need to be careful here as this may be both true and an imprecise understanding of aesthetics. Aesthetics is often about art and one may ask what one may like, appreciate and even take pleasure in when it comes to a line of performances involving bodily fluids in various forms and pain inflicted on the performer. We need to keep in mind that the aesthetic appreciation could include an intellectual effort to make something appealing and appreciated; it is often not immediate but brought about by the understanding. José Ortega y Gasset took up this issue in an essay in 1925, *The dehumanization of art and Ideas about the novel*, asking why many dislike and reject the modern art. Ortega y Gasset answers that it requires an effort to be appreciated. What we find in art we may find likewise in design. Even if we read Adolf Loos' *Ornament and Crime* from 1908 with some reservation we find a similar approach calling out disagreement when he expresses his contempt for ornaments that he sees as a crime to modern man and society while others could say the same about his architectural creations.

The point is not to ask about aesthetic qualities and discuss criteria for evaluation of them but to establish that what we like and appreciate is conditioned by who we are. This is of importance when another point is that design addresses us and communicates to us the object, structure or organisation we are invited to engage in by giving it a specific form. Design communicates and like we learn from rhetoric that there are three goals for the speech: to move, *movere*, to please, *delectare*, and to teach, *docere*, we find the same with the design. In response to the design I reach out for the fork to pick up the food without paying attention because it is an act integrated with how I eat; it attracts my attention and I find one set of cutlery more fascinating and appealing than another, and finally it makes me understand how to act in a specific situation such as using instruments for carrying the food from a plate to the mouth which is not only a matter of practicality but a social act where we now distinguish between good and bad manners. In this specific context I chose not to call the fork as such design but an artefact formed for a particular intention, but I will always find the fork appearing in a specific form and that form is design which makes us relate to things in specific ways. By doing so I repeat that I see design as connecting me and the object and that design should take care of forming the relation between us and specific objects and also forming us in relation to them.

This is what I take to be essential in aesthetics now also becoming essential to design. It now invites for a further step about what becomes essential to do for design or, we should say, for the designer.

4.

The communicative aspect of design and the relation to aesthetics require attention to be given to how the aesthetic quality addresses its user and has a potential for creating a “wow”-effect. It may be intended for stimulating consumer interest; it can be for identity, for how we through a specific design demonstrate our self-understanding and show it to others; it may be for fascination of something due to sensorial qualities, personal history or other matters, which again may relate to identity and to one’s identity in a community – there is no reason for caring about one’s identity if it was not in relation to others. In any cases it seems to imply a social dimension and furthermore it implies addressing particular groups which is something I would say is essential to aesthetics.

Aesthetics is about sensorial forms and of communicating through such forms. This sounds like a deviation from more prevalent discussions about characterising specific aesthetic qualities where my choice of one set of cutlery from another often comes down to how it looks more appealing than the other. Ignoring how puzzling it is that we often care so much about *looks* of products, after all my relation to the cutlery is very much through touch, holding it in my hands and also touching with my lips, my appreciation of something and possible “wow”-moment, is about establishing a common sensorial ground between me, the object and the set of activities the object is intended for.

Elsewhere I have (2014) suggested that when design intervenes into a specific social context it requires a training of the designer’s sensibility towards that context. While this may not raise objections, it is more difficult when I suggest that it is a central element in aesthetics as aesthetics is about judgements of taste and taste displays our relation to something expressed in that judgement with the expectation of consent from others. Hence, the judgement of taste is very much a matter of practicing social skills through

sensorial training. When we engage in discussions about aesthetic qualities, about evaluating whether something is tasteful or not, we evaluate how appropriate they address us.

Returning to Loos and Ortega y Gasset, they demonstrate how specific forms of art and design only receive appreciation from particular audiences because these audiences have specific expectations of how art and design should be. What Loos considered good taste was not exactly approved by many of his contemporaries who he in return could say lacked the education of modern man that would teach them to like something different. Hence, good taste is not universally held, though of course that point can be challenged; it was the case in classical metaphysics with one universal order. Modern forms of naturalism can maintain the same principles such as that suggested by the neuroscientific approach to aesthetics (see Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1999). Good taste reflects how a community relates to the common understanding of how to appear in it which is both about how to exercise specific practical acts and demonstrate acknowledgement of the community's acknowledged values.

To create something that has a sensorial appeal is a matter of exercising a sensibility towards the context in which the artefact should have its effect. While art can be seen differently here, not necessarily being made to appeal, we should see the aesthetics of design as context-oriented and of intervening into a context in order to communicate in it.

Two points should be made here to conclude with.

Emphasising the element of communication makes it obvious first to see how it resembles the situation of the orator. The orator must show consideration for the audience, the agenda and the material. The speech is to be formed with respect to what is considered the right kind of language and type of argumentation to use if, for example, metaphors can be used, and if of what kind for a particular audience; or if premises should be made explicit or can be taken for granted in the particular audience. When designing the speech the material, i.e. the words, the voice, the text, the case, the subject, must be formed to create the desired sentiments, opinions and actions in the audience. The speech gives form to the subject communicated which, like design, makes something appear in a specific way enabling the engagement with something. Like there is no silent speech there is no object that is not appearing in a particular form, i.e. designed, and the form never makes us indifferent.

To take the parallel between rhetoric and design a little further we can here say that design communicates to us by conveying a certain interpretation of the world and prompting actions. Buchanan, who on various occasions has drawn the parallel between design and rhetoric, stresses that rhetoric is "the study of how products come to be as vehicles of argument and persuasion about the desirable qualities of private and public life" (Buchanan, 1995, 26).

Establishing the communication one needs to ask for still more specific features and information about the context that one intervenes into. This can be developed as an art of finding the right questions – an *ars inveniendi* – which helps the orator and likewise the designer in finding the right description of a situation. This is not done by collecting facts from which we can conclude what to do but by reflecting on experiences and finding what seems most appropriate to apply to the situation which requires, for instance, acumen

and wit. Nor is it a matter of being inventive and creative, it is not a matter of thinking up something new and unexpected but thinking of possibilities and to choose the best for the situation. It is about showing the sensibility required for acting in a specific situation, to demonstrate good sense, *bon sens*, which is what we expect from the educated person who knows how to behave, how to address other people with tact and how to appear with good taste.

This brings me towards my second point for which I will return to the problem about tools, to the question whether they are solely objects that allow us to perform specific actions or whether they also make actions possible and so form them.

Take for example the cutlery by Arne Jacobsen designed specifically for the SAS Royal Hotel in Copenhagen in 1957. The design task there began as an answer to a specific situation and became something appealing beyond it. Perhaps the situation was not as specific as the hotel but more a question of a tendency in the time for which the design could appeal. This is probably what happens in many situations. The design is both the answer to the specific situation and similar situations making it broader in its appeal as many situations will of course be typical for their time and intimately related to the environment. It is also an answer that creates situations, i.e. uses the appeal to form the environment; fashion may be an example of design creating a broader change in how we view the environment such as how we should appear and what that means for different roles of social position, age and gender. We find again a parallel in rhetoric to the three goals of the speech: to please, to teach, and to move. Not only does the design appeal and we may like it; when successful it changes our relation to the environment and our actions and views on it – we are moved to do something and we learn to do it in new ways.

The cutlery of Arne Jacobsen is not exactly an example of something that changes the environment or our understanding of it; it may add a perspective to how cutlery can be and through it also expresses something typical for a specific age and its style. Perhaps a different example is the smartphone. To fully comprehend what it has done to us we need to keep in mind what kind of instrument a mobile 'phone was before the early 1990s and how operating systems and their interfaces were – imagine how many things would be entirely different if we were to write commands in DOS to use our 'phone. With the easy use and easy portability of such an advanced computer the smartphone is, it is an object that has changed our habits and ways we do things and relate to the environment hence also how we think about them. One can think about the generation gap between an 'online generation' and their parents not always understanding what connection to friends on 'phones really is. Without design to make the things accessible and integrated into our daily practices such changes would not occur or be entirely different.

Some products have here won their success due to aesthetics, by their appeal and fascination. It is, of course, not the aesthetics alone, if they did not allow and enable different activities they would not become that important – without *utilitas* and *firmitas* they would be merely for fun. But aesthetics is very much where communicative skills are.

Here I can return to and conclude with the matter of what is appropriate. If design establishes our relation to things and the habits and the actions that relate to them, if liking the artefact is context specific and social and both addresses as well as forms and maintains the social groups then design is essentially

actively participating in forming and maintaining specific forms of social order. The success of design relates to it finding its audience and engaging with it, or we should rather say making the audience engage with the designed artefact. Does that then imply that with design comes a responsibility of knowing what is implied in engaging the audience? Now the question which has been briefly touched upon about moral and politics reappears as well. If design communicates and places itself in the service of acts that objects, structures and organisations are embodying, design places itself in the service of different interests.

We can here at the end also come back to a point made in Plato's dialogues where he criticises the Sophists for only providing speeches but themselves not knowing what they talk about, about the political content. They only know about how to perform the speech. Perhaps we can accept the one making the speech is not also an expert on the content, only on how the content is disseminated, like the designer is not expected to know how to make any product. But a responsibility comes with the communication, both regarding if one will place oneself in the service of anything, another of being aware how there could be other kinds of expectations present than the one represented by the trend in the design. I am not suggesting a need for a radical critique but a need for attention and nuances to avoid becoming blind to the plurality present.

While a lot of design today communicates on behalf of marketing it may play safe out of fear of not targeting its audience due to expectations about it which strategy make one blind to how the audience is not homogeneous. Here my experience as user comes again. Often I find I have little options to choose between as I am considered a consumer with almost pre-defined user needs. Advertising, magazines, endless public discussions in different media tell me what I need and how I should choose, and I get many offers of new design that can answer this. But, I do not get many offers if I want something different. If I do not want the overloaded interface with endless applications I have no interest in; the new kitchen with new solution for the drawers with integrated handles I never thought I would need and find far less appealing than my old ones for which I cannot buy any components because new design is the only thing in the shop; and the taps which seem always to be 'new arrivals' like latest fashion in shirts and yet give me no option for choosing what I really like.

Is design then becoming a self-enclosed and self-confirming activity? Demonstrating sensibility to what can be given 'safe' answers? While another sensibility of the needs present but yet not articulated well, are abandoned? Should the designer here learn more sensibility?

If the essential of design is related to how it can demonstrate sensibility and intervene into social relations, communicating with the users and making them appreciate and engage with things that both support and alter their relation to the environment, then there seems to be also an essentially critical dimension hidden within this sensibility, within the aesthetic dimension.

## References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press (1958), second edition.
- Buchanan, R. (1995) "Rhetoric, Humanism, and Design" in Buchanan and Margolin, eds. *Discovering Design*. The University of Chicago Press, pp. 23-66.

- Dunne, Anthony. 2005. *Hertzian Tales. Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design*. Cambridge, Mass. & London, The MIT Press.
- Friberg, Carsten. 2014. "Design and the Question of Aesthetics", *Artifact*, vol III, issue 3, pp. 1.1-8.
- , 2017. "Education through Everyday Things" in Friberg and Vasquez, eds. *Experiencing the Everyday*. Copenhagen, NSU Press, pp. 207-223.
- Golsby-Smith, Tony. 1996. "Fourth Order Design. A Practical Perspective", *Design Issues*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring), pp. 5-25.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1996. "Die Frage nach der Technik" in *Die Technik und die Kehre*. Stuttgart, Neske (1962), pp. 9-40. (English ).
- Heskett, John. 2002. *Toothpicks and Logos. Design in Everyday Life*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Lysemose, Kasper. 2013. "Håndens fænomenologi. Til en filosofisk antropologi", *Studier I pædagogisk filosofi*, No. 2, pp. 78-102.
- Perelman, Charles. 1997. *L'empire rhétorique. Rhétorique et argumentation*. Paris, Librairie philosophique J.Vrin.
- Ramachandran, V.S. and William Hirstein. 1999. "The Science of Art. A Neurological Theory of Aesthetic Experience", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6, No. 6-7, pp. 15-51.
- Vial, Stéphane. 2010. *Court traité du design*. Paris, Press Universitaires de France.