

SUMMARY

The aesthetic in design

A discussion of the historical role and current status of the concept of aesthetic in design literature with a view to identifying possible points of departure for a renewed discussion of aesthetic in the field design

The dissertation examines the paradox that the concept of the aesthetic in design, on the one hand, is such a frequently used concept and considered essential for legitimizing the *design-ness* of design, while, on the other hand, it is not generally accepted as a key motivation for design creation. A key motivation for the dissertation is the absence of a specific discussion of the concept of the aesthetic in design, which seems puzzling, for two reasons especially.

First, because of the growing interest in the aesthetic in other fields, for example economics and cognition science, combined with a growing in design as a method in other professions and disciplines, for example in connection with innovation, albeit in a form that does not include the aesthetic. And secondly because the design profession is currently faced with a need to redefine its core competences due to changing conditions in the industry brought about by the transition from a post-industrial to a knowledge and information society. In a primarily historiographic approach, the dissertation explores and discusses existing perceptions of the aesthetic in the design history literature, as these perceptions are represented in design history and in various positions in design method research and design theory research. Further, the dissertation contributes with a discussion of the consequences that are seen as resulting from the prevailing concepts of the aesthetic in design and the lack of a discussion of the topic in the literature. In extension of this discussion, the dissertation proposes relevant points of departure for a new discussion of the aesthetic in design.

The project examines the aesthetic in design within the discipline of industrial product design; this investigation is based on an understanding of design products that is framed by a holistic cultural analysis of design, where the dimensions of production, distribution and consumption are incorporated into a holistic understanding of the object. In terms of a theory of science, the main foundation is design research with a humanist or cultural orientation, but the discussion of the concept and the attempts to define it also draw on insights from cognitively oriented design theory, emotional design studies and theories and concepts from philosophy and the design profession literature. The epistemological framework is hermeneutic, operating with an inclusive philosophical-phenomenological understanding of the aesthetic. Thus, the aesthetic is neither viewed as being purely subject-oriented or purely object-oriented, as the aesthetic may be a quality found in the object as well as an experience that emerges in the meeting between subject and object. In its

theoretical discussion and conceptual understanding, the literature is geographically confined primarily to Anglo-American design literature, and the project mainly addresses the ongoing transformation process brought about by the academization of design education. The dissertation takes a thesis-testing approach and revolves around the following main questions: First, why is the concept so difficult to identify and argument for in design? Second, how are the respective understandings of the concept of the aesthetic associated with the respective disciplinary and professional skill sets present in the design field, and how has that affected the lack of a clear understanding of the concept in the field of design? Third, what and how close are the relationships among the various concepts of the aesthetic and design? Fourth, if a new discussion about the aesthetic is relevant for the field of design, where should it take its point of departure? And fifth, can new statements about the aesthetic, including contributions from philosophy, make a relevant contribution to such a discussion?

After the initial introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses the concept of the aesthetic from a *philosophical* point of view, including the role of the alliance between art philosophy and the concept of the aesthetic as well as how philosophical perceptions of the aesthetic experience have been related to design, and how they might contribute. Chapter 3 discusses the understanding of the aesthetic in *cultural theory* in the sense of *aestheticization* as the basis for a subsequent evaluation of the impact of this perception in design literature. Chapter 4 reviews and discusses *design history's* application and treatment of the concept, based on an examination of the influence of Modernism and modernization on the relationship between the aesthetic and design. The assessment here is that the alliance between art and aesthetic has had a strong impact on the role and position of the aesthetic in design history literature. Chapter 5 reviews the role and status assigned to the aesthetic by design methods and theories. A special focus in the chapter is that design is a heterogeneous discipline, and that the scientific points of departure of the various disciplinary traditions affect the understandings of the aesthetic and the role it is assigned as a motivation for design.

Chapter 6 synthesizes and condenses the discussions of the previous chapters and concludes, in part, that the aesthetic in design serves as a synonym for several other key concepts to the discipline, which are identified and listed. Next, it is concluded that the concept of aesthetic in design is used to serve three distinct purposes: It serves as a *descriptive* term, as a *qualifying* (normative) term and as *legitimizing* for the substance of the discipline. The chapter further argues that there are multiple concepts of the aesthetic at play in the discipline, not all of which are equally explicitly stated, and that the respective concepts are closely tied to and spring from these individual disciplines. It is further the assessment that there is a clear link between concepts of the aesthetic in design literature and design concepts; that is to say that the concepts of the aesthetic are closely related to the various motivations for design, the sources that the design object relies on for recognition and approval and the terms of its validation. The chapter also explores crucial impact that the original disciplines in design, that is, art and crafts, along with engineering as well as ethical ideals and views of design in a consumer society have had on the understandings of the concept. On this background, the dissertation identifies six concepts of the aesthetic in design literature: *classic art aesthetic*, *critical "academic" aesthetic*, *elitist aestheticization*, *aestheticization*, *functional aesthetic* and *altruistic aesthetic*. These concepts are presented in a proposed *model of concepts of the aesthetic*, and it is discussed how these various concepts of the aesthetic and design motivations are involved in promoting and canonizing four specific types of design: *Intellectual design*, *Anonymous design*, *Altruistic design* and *Commercial design*. As part of this discussion, the dissertation also addresses the close ties between the aesthetic in design and various concepts of art aesthetic as well as the suspicious view of market-driven motivations that commonly characterizes the design literature.

In Chapter 7 the dissertation argues that, despite its diverse meanings, the aesthetic does possess a high degree of validity as a synthesizing concept, and that it is time for a new discussion in the field of design about the aesthetic as a core design concept. The dissertation recommends including philosophical concepts of the aesthetic as an experience, emotional design theories and angles from cognitive theory as a point of departure for this discussion and points to key areas where the discussion might be initiated. In particular, based on the absence of the concept in design literature and in the new *Design Thinking* literature, it is emphasized that an important point of departure for a new concept of the aesthetic in design would be a professional debate about the aesthetic as a key competence for design professionals.

Keywords: *aesthetic*, design, design theory, design method, design history, design *competence*