Everyday Design: The Aesthetic Dimension of Alternative Use

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Abstract. The Functional Account of Design Aesthetic Appreciation (FADAA), a recent position on design in analytic aesthetics, attempts to establish a *sui generis* aesthetic theory of design that is somehow distinct from that of the fine arts. This account recognizes that, in evaluating the aesthetic dimension of design, not only form but also function and use are critical variables. However, FAADA has yet to question the status of being a user—usership—as well as the aesthetic strategies we use in our everyday interactions with designed objects.

I will look into the possibility of broadening the FADAA debate on design appreciation by (1) acknowledging the role of the perceiving subject in interacting with design objects and (2) including instances of alternative use as possible critical use practices without diminishing the aesthetic significance of function. To this end, I will introduce the concept of "everyday design," which refers to an interpretative act by the user that generates an excess of function in relation to the context of use and the user itself.

Keywords: Aesthetics of Design · Everyday Design · Everyday Aesthetics · Usership · Overstanding

1 Introduction

There are two main approaches to the aesthetics of design in contemporary philosophy. Within one approach, design objects are studied primarily as "things," affective objects [1–4]. According to this paradigm, artworks are "things" *par excellence* because they can suspend a deterministic view of reality. Therefore, as our knowledge of design objects is promoted by their functional dimension, they usually occupy a subordinate position in these aesthetic theories,[1] and their aesthetic dimension is often reduced to mere appearance. I call this approach "the traditionalist account of the aesthetics of design."

The alternative approach does not discern the functional dimension of design objects from their aesthetics. What we might call the "Functional Account of Design Aesthetic Appreciation" (FADAA), a recent position on design in analytic aesthetics, supports this

[1] The interpretation that Martin Heidegger [5] offered of Van Gogh's "A Pair of Shoes" is a widely known example of this approach.

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viewpoint for establishing a *sui generis* aesthetic theory of design, somehow independent from that of the fine arts.

The first part of the paper will be devoted to an introduction to this account, which encompasses the views of a number of scholars, including Jane Forsey [6] and Glenn Parsons [7]. I will focus on elucidating the role that the notion of "function" plays within FADAA and presenting what I believe to be the limit of rigidly applying this notion.

In the second part, I will investigate the possibility of broadening the FADAA debate on design appreciation by (1) recognizing the role of the perceiving subject in the interaction with design objects and (2) including instances of alternative use as possible critical use practices, without lessening the aesthetic significance of function. To this end, I shall introduce the concept of "everyday design." In addition, I will answer potential objections FADAA's scholars may have.

2 Functional Accounts of Design Aesthetic Appreciation

2.1 An Alternative Paradigm

I label Functional Accounts of Design Aesthetic Appreciation (FADAA) all those philosophical accounts that focus on proposing an alternative paradigm of design appreciation to the one advocated by the traditionalist and art-centered approaches in aesthetics.

The traditionalist approaches primarily concern the historical genesis and critique of design forms and styles [1–4]. Even though it encompasses a wide range of perspectives, we can identify fundamental ideas that characterize this approach. One is to regard the beauty of design primarily in terms of the formal, surface appearance of things and their symbolic messages, omitting the role of functionality from the equation. This constraint stems from the historical incompatibility of "purpose" with the aesthetic attitude *par excellence*: disinterestedness [8].[2] Another principle that guides the traditionalist approach is to analyze design artifacts by following the progression of art movements and their historical role in shaping cultural imagery. Because of these parallels, design is frequently regarded as less aesthetically profound than the great arts.

On the contrary, FADAA recognizes the importance of active engagement with design objects and highlights their practical function as aesthetically relevant to our assessments of design objects in particular. Therefore, these accounts suggest the inclusion of the notion of "function" as a guiding principle for approaching design in aesthetics rather than interpreting the symbolic meaning of artifacts. This inclusion allows FADAA theorists to assert that design presents new challenges and research areas for philosophical aesthetics, which traditionalist theorists had previously disregarded. For example, the inclusion of the ideas of "function" and "use" implies that FADAA contextualizes the primary aesthetic experience of design in everyday life rather than in the territories of the art world, like, for example, exhibitions in museums and galleries, and that "the theory of design […] provides a model for a rich aesthetics of the everyday" [6, 7].

Several scholars can be mentioned to capture the essence of this account [9–11]; however, I will primarily refer to Jane Forsey [6] and Glenn Parsons [7]. Their proposals

[2] The concept of "aesthetic disinterest," which Immanuel Kant refers to as "The First Moment of Judgment of Taste," corresponds to the appreciation of the object for its own sake [8, 43–52].

are similar in the effort to establish the importance of the functional aspect of design for its aesthetic evaluation.

2.2 The Role that the Notion of "Function" Plays within FADAA

The widely held understanding of aesthetic appreciation of design objects among FADAA scholars presupposes that we first recognize the object of our appreciation *as design*. This recognition corresponds to acknowledging the purpose of an object, which, for example, in the case of a chair, is that of sitting. In other words, to assert that a chair is beautiful, we must first acknowledge that it is a chair by recognizing it is an object for sitting and using it for that purpose, that is, having direct experience of the object through use.

Structuring the understanding of the mode of appreciation of design objects on the acknowledged function grants several things: first, that we do not separate objects from their practical dimension, second that the object is appreciated for what it is, and third, it allows us to make comparative evaluations of objects of the same kind. Therefore, the role that the notion of "acknowledged purpose" assumes in FADAA is that of a criterion for identifying and classifying objects.

Characterizing design objects in this way allows us to speak about a *sui generis* aesthetic theory of design, as opposed to one of the artworks, which are notoriously devoid of practical applications. In this regard, FADAA accounts transcend the limitations of the traditionalist account of design aesthetics.

It should be mentioned, however, that even if FADAA proposals are united on establishing the importance of the functional aspect of design for its aesthetic appraisal, diverse perspectives exist on where the acknowledged purpose originates. The proposals differ in establishing the *locus* of determination of function, which is placed in the designer's intention—intended function [6, 19]—or as belonging to the object itself—proper function [7, 87–88]. However, when we consider the actual variety of viable possibilities, this discrepancy in determining the origin of the object's function is not as pronounced. In a broader context that also considers the user, neither of the two strategies postulates the possibility that the origin of the object's function resides precisely in this subjectivity. We might even claim that FADAA's ontology so far suggests a passive and even absent recipient. To put it differently, appealing to the idea of "acknowledged purpose" opposes identifying an object according to any function for which individual users actually use the object.

2.3 From Acknowledged to Prescribed Function

The criticism I make towards the above approach is related to the fact that, even if the requirement of determining design only through the acknowledged function is in place to ensure that our theory is *sui generis* for design, it nonetheless contradicts the effort to transcend the traditionalist approach.

I claim that the idea of "acknowledged function" implies there is a "correct" function we ought to respond to aesthetically. In this sense, the function that identifies the object also serves as a prescription for the user. In other words, the additional role that the notion of "function" plays within FADAA is to prescribe a correct way of use and opposes

identifying an object according to the function for which individual users actually use the object.

As a consequence, by denying that the function is every-time enacted by the user, the FADAA strategy is incapable of formulating an aesthetic subjectivity of users that is in stark contrast with that of art's spectators postulated by the traditionalists. Therefore, the meta-theoretical remark on FADAA I am proposing is that, in their attempt to establish an aesthetics specific to design, they deploy a traditionalist account of authorship taken from the fine arts and imply a passive recipient (*a la* spectator). Both factors render such theories potentially unsuitable and obsolete for contemporary design research and practice, which are shifting toward a more inclusive and socially oriented practice [12–15].

One way out of this impasse is to refer to the clause proposed by FADAA concerning the context of appreciation of design: the everyday. To take this clause seriously implies considering the fact that in everyday life, we do not always use objects for their prescribed function alone and that we may appreciate them for precisely that reason. For example, we might consider a chair more beautiful than another one precisely because it affords us alternative uses. FADAA accounts, on the other hand, acknowledge only the prescribed function as relevant in the aesthetics of design,[3] renouncing the fact that the quotidian aesthetic appreciation of design objects can also derive from the misuse of objects.

Thus, we can assert that the notion of "prescribed function" in FADAA limits the scope of the aesthetics of design; on the one hand, it neglects salient moments of daily life, and on the other hand, it admits that everyday life is structured around a series of rigid behavioral guidelines. This perspective is consistent with the traditionalist belief that there is a correct manner to appreciate art, as well as a correct interpretation of meaning, etc.

3 Appreciating Everyday Design

There is no denying that a series of shared rules govern everyday life: for example, there are "tacit" social restrictions that shape our behavior, and objects come with institutionalized expectations; for example, the table comes with the expectation that one should not eat from the floor and the spoon with an expectation that one should not sup directly from the bowl [16, 50] [17, 62].

However, compliance with these rules is not mandatory. As for our relationship with everyday objects, we do not constantly interact with them as indicated by their prescribed function. On the contrary, we often use existing products for new purposes without necessarily transfiguring their identity and regressing into kitsch.

Within design research, this phenomenon is called "everyday design," which Ron Wakkary and Leah Maestri define as "a resourceful appropriation of artifacts [...] through design-in-use that allows emergent properties to arise and addresses individual needs" [13]. This phenomenon also captures the post-phenomenological idea that, if we take the user's perspective, "designer intent may be subverted" [18, 53].

[3] For example Forsey claims that "The functional quality of designed objects lies in their being meant *to be used in a given way*, and this use is part of what it means to be that thing in the first place" [6, 31] (italics mine).

As we have seen previously, the concept of "prescribed function" might imply an intentionalist account of design objects' interpretation. Similarly to intentionalist theories of literary interpretation, which hold that the meaning of a text is determined by the author's intentions rather than the reader, appealing to the idea of the prescribed function in FADAA implies that the contribution of the user is merely reproductive as the design object is conceived as a self-sufficient whole. In this situation, we might refer to the "designer fallacy," which Don Ihde defines as.

> the notion that a designer can design into a technology its purposes and uses. In turn, this fallacy implies some degree of material neutrality or plasticity in the object, over which the designer has control. In short, the designer fallacy is 'deistic' in its 18th century sense, that the designer-god, working with plastic material, creates a machine or artifact which seems 'intelligent' by design – and performs in its designed way. [18, 51]

Appealing to the designer fallacy does not negate the idea of the "prescribed function," which now shifted away from the designer and is still detectable on the grounds of established formal conventions and archetypes. However, in the last instance, it depends mainly on the user's decision to acknowledge or see it. Again, I can use a chair as a step stool just because the object lends itself to different usages. Sometimes, I may even intentionally act against the designer's intentions like a Derridian bricoleur. So, appealing to the designer fallacy does not entirely rule out the possibility of referring to something comparable to the designer's plan of use; rather, it serves to show how "designer intent may be subverted, become a minor use, or not result in uses in line with intended ends at all" [18, 53]. In other words, the design object acquires its meaning, so to speak, throughout its relationalities, and it does not univocally prescribe its own function.

To add a final point, we can say that for an aesthetic theory of design integrated into everyday life, the considerations we have just made make employing the notion of an empirical designer's intention unproductive.

3.1 Possible Objections

FADAA accounts may, however, have an objection since they stress that we appreciate design *as design* when our formal assessment concurs with considerations on prescribed functionality, which is the general principle to justify the particular aesthetic dimension of design, such that it is also more complex than judgments based solely on form.

By suggesting to consider also alternative uses, supporters of FADAA might object that, in these cases, we do not appreciate these objects *as* design objects because we are not identifying them correctly.

However, what some FADAA scholars actually object to the examples of everyday design is the secondary role the designer and his or her art assume, not that they break a constitutive rule of aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, appreciating design objects in everyday design mode still retains the notion of "prescribed function," allowing us to identify objects, talk about them, and utter comprehensible judgments. For example, I can say, "This chair is beautiful because I can use it also as a step stool." So, we still appreciate

the object for what it is—a chair—but we also add to the appreciation of this object that they afford more than their prescribed function admits.

By deploying the idea of "everyday design," I, therefore, suggest expanding the philosophical reflection on the aesthetic dimension of design objects to include this phenomenon as one of the modes of interaction with design objects in actual use, but, most importantly, as part of the set of our typical mundane activities.

This addition would expand the range of aesthetically rewarding experiences of design objects, in this case, based on the user's own creativity rather than that of the designer.

This distinction requires elucidation by noting two aspects of the phenomena of everyday design. First, it poses a different philosophical question about the design object's identity than the problem posed by multifunctional objects, like the sofa bed discussed by Rafael De Clercq [9]. Everyday design does not relate to the enjoyment of objects with acknowledged multi-purposes but to a mode of production of functional meaning by the user who ascribes to the object an additional identity.

Second, everyday design is not an artistic reflection on form, function, or even design itself but a pragmatic activity governed by the users' unique circumstances of use.

However, these cases—multifunctional objects and artistic designs—tell us something about the relationship between professional design and everyday design: everyday design is also a tool deployed by expert designers themselves. The *Coat Check Chair,* designed by Joey Zeledón,[4] an example of artistic design, is just one of many design objects which result from the reflection on the possibility of appropriating objects for different uses and challenges the cultural framework with which one attempts to identify the function of a hanger.

I am not claiming that users and expert designers should be put on the same plane. Expert designers have the ability and independence to criticize and assess the inadequacies of established design practices and envision new alternative modes of designing in ways not available to everyday designers.

3.2 A New Framework for the Aesthetics of Design

I have shown that our use relationship—usership—with design objects may exceed the prescribed function, and we cannot deny that we aesthetically appreciate these moments of use that go beyond the acknowledged identity of the object.

By carrying on the parallel started by Ihde between literature and design, I suggest borrowing Wayne C. Booth's term "overstanding"[5] [20, 21] to describe the interpretative act that generates an excess of function in relation to the context of use and the user itself. We can therefore postulate that in everyday life, we "overstand" objects "in terms of the possible range of uses fantasized or actualized" [18, 58].

[4] To view photos of this product, please visit [19].

[5] In contrast to the widely criticized concept of "overinterpretation" of literary text [22], Booth proposes the concept of "overstanding" to describe the reader's act of asking questions to the text in relation to other texts and practices [20, 21].

4 Conclusion

Aesthetic theories that encourage a functional perspective on design to comprehend its aesthetic dimension (FADAA) move away from a traditionalist model of aesthetics. However, by suggesting identifying design *as design* holding to the idea of "an *acknowledged* function" (intended by a designer or essential to the object), they deploy the notion of "function" too rigidly and reveal a type of experiential subject—user—that is still dependent on the authorial identity of the objects, as advocated by the more traditionalist approaches they seek to overcome.

By incorporating instances of alternative use, that is, uses not determined by the design object's acknowledged function, I suggest extending the scope of FADAA's theoretical project. To this end, I introduced the concept of "everyday design," which also raises a question that may be crucial in the philosophical debate on design: what role does the user play in the development of knowledge in material culture?

Including everyday design among typical mundane activities implies that a philosophical reflection on the aesthetic dimension of design significantly shifts the focus on usership, that is, the status of being a user, rather than other aesthetic modes of access, for example, spectatorship or disinterestedness.

Second, because everyday design is a *modus operandi* in which the user and the circumstances determine the use of design objects, in addition to the acknowledged purpose, it challenges the way users are expected to use products by undermining the function they ought to aesthetically respond to. Hence, the idea of "everyday design" becomes a valuable tool for identifying emancipatory traits in the way people interact with design objects.

Consequently, to include a theoretical analysis of the appreciation of user-created alternative functions, the user gains the role of a semantic agent, not merely an interpreter of prescribed functions but a generator of accidental functions which are aesthetically meaningful. This supports the idea, often ignored in the philosophical debate over design's aesthetics, that the user is someone who hacks into knowledge production, highlighting that this is not a privilege pertaining only to professional designers.

The functional account of design aesthetic appreciation has the potential to make apparent all of these issues due to the recognition that not only form but also function and use are critical variables in evaluating the aesthetic dimension of design. However, FAADA has yet to question the status of being a user—usership—and the actual aesthetic strategies that we, as users, deploy in our everyday engagement with designed objects.

Finally, by taking the perspective of the user, which already FADAA's focus on function suggests, and the phenomenon of everyday design emphasizes significantly more, we are encouraged to see professional design as a creative process aiming at creating an engaging experience of use rather than just the production of finished products to be merely appreciated for their formal values.

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