



Aesthetics of Design for Social Innovation. Pathways for a Dialogue with Everyday Aesthetics

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Abstract. The paper presents “ADESSO - Aesthetics of Design for Social Innovation”, foundational research that aims at investigating the sensorial insights and the aesthetic experience related to services, relationships, environments, communication strategies, and spaces within Design for Social Innovation approaches, highlighting the impact on processes and outcomes.

As Design for Social Innovation deals with all that design branches can do to promote and support social changes towards social and environmental sustainability, such processes are usually typified by a strong dematerialization of the design object itself: they own a relational and dialogical perspective. As the object itself of the design process has constantly been expanded, mainly towards its intangibility, the focus on the value generated by the experience of artefacts and places has found its area of investigation. Also, a decreased authorship has progressively turned the designer’s role into participatory-design-led practices. Indeed, Design Aesthetics has mainly dealt with product design and the related sensorial involvements, and no specific studies have so far included Design for Social Innovation.

Focusing on these three principal axes of change for design research, ADESSO starts by investigating the aesthetic experience generated throughout sustainable and participative cases, stressing the importance of differential contributions to the whole process.

Keywords: Aesthetic · Design for Social Innovation · Everyday Aesthetics · Applied Aesthetics · Experiences

1 Introduction

ADESSO (Aesthetics of Design for Social Innovation) research investigates the possible interplay between Design for Social Innovation and Aesthetics. Launched at the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano in 2018, thanks to university funds for basic research, the research is now capitalising on its findings in further projects by its team.

The research aims to investigate sensory aspects and the aesthetic qualities of relationships, services, environments, communication systems, and spaces designed for design for social innovation interventions, with attention to both the processes and the

project results. To further explain what we mean by “design for social innovation,” let’s take a step back.

“We define social innovations as new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act.” Szymańska in [1]. The outcomes of social innovation are all around us: they are new ideas that work to meet pressing unmet needs, improve people’s lives, and mobilise the ubiquitous intelligence within any society [1]. As Manzini [2] states, to promote social innovation design experts must use their design skills and competencies to recognize promising cases when and where they appear and to reinforce them. That is, to help them to be more accessible, effective, lasting, and replicable. Design for social innovation is everything that design experts can do to activate, sustain, and orient processes of social change toward sustainability [3–5].

ADESSO builds on two research strands with which it is closely connected, illustrated below, to develop initial reflections on the relationships between the aesthetics of everyday life and design for social innovation.

The coordinator of the ADESSO research is a member of the Polimi DESIS Lab (<https://www.desis.polimi.it>), one of the research centres of the international DESIS Network (<https://www.desisnetwork.org>), founded by Ezio Manzini and focused on the role of design within sustainability and social innovation-oriented research and practices. Since September 2014, DESIS has been a non-profit and cultural association promoting design for social innovation in higher education institutions to generate valuable design knowledge and to create meaningful social changes in collaboration with external stakeholders.

The second research strand is linked to the DESIS Philosophy Talks (<https://www.desis-philosophytalks.org>), organised within the DESIS network since 2015, a Ezio Manzini and Virginia Tassinari initiative aiming to nurture the dialogue between design and philosophy, practice and theory. The purpose of this initiative is to encourage a theoretical and philosophical discourse starting from the state of the art of design for social innovation and sustainability.

2 Research Framework

The literature review demonstrates that Design for Social Innovation still lacks a structured aesthetics-driven discourse. Such a gap outlines the domain the research intended to investigate further through a cross-sector approach between design and aesthetics.

The first step of the research, through literature review, aims to map existing contributions to the topic in terms of relevant concepts and experimentations dealing with the relationship between the social context with art and design-led interventions, which observations have been helpful to guide the following steps of the research [6–11]. During the first DESIS Philosophy Talk, “Emerging Aesthetics”, that took place at Parsons - The New School for Design (New York) in 2012, the conversation was based on a background paper by Manzini and Tassinari that proposed and motivated this basic question: “Are sustainable social changes generating a new aesthetics?”. The talk reflected on the enjoyment of doing things together as an emerging and shared aesthetics: “can we liberate the word *aesthetics* from the overload of connotations which we inherited from our

recent philosophical past and use it in a broader sense to denote a change in *sensitivity* in the context of our contemporary lives? [How the] shift of *sensitivity* registered in creative communities [...] could eventually help us to understand better the phenomena of grassroots social innovation emerging in our society and of design practices dealing with them [?]” Tassinari in [12, p. 248]. Quoting Jacques Rancière: can we consider, today, “sustainable aesthetics” as moving the political paradigm towards a more participative and open society? [13]. Considering the increasing prevalence of participatory design, may we inquire if aesthetics is generated, emerging, or co-produced? [14].

In this context, what is the designer’s role versus the citizens and communities participating in consultation, co-design, and envisioning activities developed within design for social innovation research and practices? How can designers deal with aesthetics when the main design object is social, while traditional object-bound aesthetic concepts lose their validity? [14].

Koskinen describes three possible approaches to aesthetics through what he calls *new social design*: i) *agonistic*, considering aesthetics as a way to lure people into interacting with controversial content; ii) *convivial*, which registers aesthetics in community interactions; and iii) *conceptual*, which does away with aesthetics [14].

Without focusing only on process, it is interesting to explore whether the results of actions and designs dealing with social innovations have an aesthetic impact and what kind of impact collaborative design actions through the tools of design and art can have.

Markussen defined the “disruptive aesthetics” conceptual framework of design activism, exploring the impact of design activism on people’s everyday life and what makes it different from its closely related ‘sister arts’ political activism and art activism [15]. Disruptive aesthetics has two characteristics: the potentiality to disrupt or subvert existing systems of power, raising critical awareness of ways of living, working, and consuming, and its aesthetic potential (shared with art activism), especially in the relations between people’s actions and feelings. The relationship between art and social relations is also at the heart of what Nicolas Bourriaud [16] calls *relational aesthetics*; he defines it as a set of artistic practices with the whole of human relations and their social context as theoretical and practical point of departure. Interestingly, these meanings of aesthetics recall the ancient Greek idea of aesthetics closely connected with an ethical view of reality.

If we try to dwell in the field of aesthetics studies, the subject matter of the so-called Aesthetics of the Everyday or Everyday Aesthetics [17–21] owns is undoubtedly close to that of design for social innovation, participatory and design activism practices as it focuses on everyday, social, relational matters intrinsic to the world we live in. The object of Everyday Aesthetics is precisely everything that characterises our everyday life, including objects, events, and activities. It aims to give due regard to the entirety of people’s multi-faceted aesthetic life, including various ingredients of everyday life: artefacts of daily use, chores around the house, interactions with other people, and quotidian activities such as eating, walking, and bathing. Also, Everyday Aesthetics seeks to liberate aesthetic inquiry from an almost exclusive focus on beauty [...] as conceived from modern Western thought. Within its purview, it includes those qualities that pervade everyday experience, such as pretty, cute, messy, tasteful, dirty, lively, and monotonous, to name only a few [22].

Based on these concepts, ADESSO research attempts to relate design approaches to social innovations with insights from Everyday Aesthetics to nurture reflections to move design advancements forward.

3 ADESSO Research

In recent decades, design has faced increasingly complex social challenges, and there has been a strong dematerialization of the design object itself, focusing on a relational and dialogical perspective. More generally, it is possible to remark that the object itself of the design process has constantly been upgraded, with primary attention to the intangible sides rather than the tangible ones, granting a renewed value to the experience generated by artefacts and places.

On the other hand, among the various currents of applied aesthetics, Everyday Aesthetics leads to the analysis of everyday actions and functions rather than just the pleasurable experience generated by contemplation, thus also focusing more on processes, actions and relationships.

Indeed, design aesthetics has mainly dealt with product design and related sensorial involvements. So far, no specific studies have included Design for Social Innovation because of the need to investigate the aesthetic experience generated through socially innovative, sustainable, and participative cases. The driving research questions are:

- How can Aesthetics contribute to envisioning more effective and pleasurable human-centred designs, impacting the design process's different phases and outcomes?
- How does Applied Aesthetics impact the identification and desirability process of the design object?
- How can Design and Aesthetics launch a novel discourse and set up a model of action and intervention regarding sustainability?

Based on a multidisciplinary approach, the research has launched a cross-sector discourse within and outside the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano, embracing a broad perspective including Sociology, Semiotics, Environmental Psychology, Ethology, Philosophy of Space, Communications Studies, and several branches of Aesthetics.

The research has been structured around the following six areas, then discussed in a 1-day symposium organised at Politecnico di Milano with experts – academics and practitioners – from the fields of study mentioned above:

- Engagement and/or activism
- Individual and/or Community
- Body and/or Technology
- Places and/or Spaces
- Visioning and/or Shaping
- Meaning and/or Interpretation

ADESSO symposium acted as a dialogue aimed at reframing research questions, mapping gaps and opportunities, identifying future research directions, and establishing an initial network of contributors. The input from national and international case studies on social innovation and artistic projects contributed to the discussion, adding a practice-based perspective to the analysis.

4 Emerging Reflections for Future Studies

Through this initial research, three primary considerations emerge for the follow-up study.

The Role of the Designer – In design for social innovation practices, the role of the design researcher stands in the ability to make social conversations among different actors happen not only through consensus-building methodologies but also as mediators and facilitators, thanks to collaborative tools that are specific to the designer's expertise (mock-ups, prototypes and scenarios) [2, 23]. These tools are not only means to visualise ideas to support discussions and debates but also to conceive together future and complex trajectories for change and materialise initial steps towards such changes. By focusing our attention on public spaces, the materialisation of speculative artefacts takes shape through the (co)design of places for staging actions and relationships and as collective demonstrations of alternative ways of experiencing public spaces. These are *urban commons*, intended as those “resources [that] range from local streets and parks to public spaces to a variety of shared neighbourhood amenities“ [24, p. 57] where the stimulation of a community development policy can play “a critical role as a major intellectual critique of the dominant model that privileged property rights as the core solution to collective action problems“ [25, p. 4]. The bond between politics and the spatial dimension of public spaces should therefore be nurtured by the naturalistic aesthetic conception, according to which the human being is an organism that is radically dependent on the living environment, in which it develops natural, social, and cultural interactions that are necessary for life itself. Consequently, all experience is aesthetic [26]. By supporting the collective configuration of the everyday world, the designer opens up new perspectives and possibilities, creating the representations of debates and discussions: an aesthetic and thus political [27] configuration of the everyday. Thomas Markussen traced this connection as “disruptive aesthetics”, at the core of his definition of design activism and building on Jacques Rancière's agonism: “For Rancière, what characterises the aesthetic act, in particular, is that it introduces new heterogeneous subjects and objects into the social field of perception. In so doing, the aesthetic act affects people's experience in a certain way: it reorients perceptual space, thereby disrupting socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging and inhabiting the everyday world” [15, p. 4].

This opens new questions that cross Everyday Aesthetics. What is the role of design experts in building a collective aesthetic literacy? What transversal toolkits across (participatory) design, social innovation, and aesthetics can give citizens the ability and sensibility to understand the present better and discuss the kind of future they want? How the tangible and situated manifestation by design (i.e., artefacts, performances, spatial prototypes) of such possibilities exploits the continuum of human experience, the full array of sensory and semiotic vectors?

The Object of the Research Today - What is the object? What is the object in design? What is the object in everyday aesthetics? Acknowledging the shift of the design focus from the sole tangible artefacts (outputs) to the generated implications of those into impactful effects, in the level of engagement through co-design processes and in the achieved empowerment towards further actions lies the focal point of social innovation practices. The “uptake” of design outputs through uses and interactions builds on

the Norberg-Schulz phenomenology of the *sense of place*, or, the *identity of place*: the dialectic of the human experience with the physical environment [28]. This dialectic is embedded in the human experience of the physical environment, which Norberg-Schulz [28] defines as the *existential foothold* building on Heidegger's concept of dwelling [29]. Human beings 'inhabit' when they can orient themselves in an environment and when they can find identification with it. In this sense, an inhabited space is a place: a place is the phenomenology of space, and the built environment – the tangible artefacts defining a place – is the physical manifestation of inhabiting because it discovers meanings potentially present in the given a priori environment [30]. A place "has in itself a strongly experiential connotation [...], constructed in our memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex association" Graumann in [31, p. 108]. Places enclose and compress time in their thousand cavities since it is a "psychological diagram" that transcends the geometrical space [32, p. 73]. Therefore, the geographical space is not detached from the imaginative and emotional dimension, linked to the way the individual, in his social behaviour, represents and organises the reality in which he lives. European strands have investigated this kind of interpretation of public space, in particular the work of Arto Haapala, which can be included in the Finnish strand of Everyday Aesthetics [33, pp. 115–116]. Participatory practices toward social innovations in public spaces can add a layer to the reality of the environment: from *what it is* to *what it might be*. Everyday Aesthetics, which proposes a new conception of aesthetics as a theory of sensitivity and experience of the everyday environment, can reinforce the action already inherent in the design discipline of creating a more beautiful world, understood as fair, responsible, and as a common good.

Situated Futures - From the above reflections, the concept of future-making through the designer's participated acts in the public space has already emerged. More precisely, these design interventions may act as *situated futures*, scenarios of future innovation patterns. They serve to contextualise new ideas as well as *to make futures by relationality*, meaning to make interactions with and through the tangible environment, to engage a plurality of voices in conversation, and to create a common ground for a more participated, dialogical, and inclusive social transformation [34]. The concept of situatedness is clearly defined by Anna Tsing et al. [35] as "the perspective *on and from* a particular somewhere, as opposed to the point of view *on and from* everywhere. In other words, view from a specific patch". Therefore, the everyday present assumes a phenomenological and ontological relevance, where ritualised behaviours, social bonds, and forms of participation in the affairs of society or politics are also included among the 'specifically aesthetic' objects and events [33, p. 30]. By questioning our times and staging alternative narratives, co-created and prototyped public spaces are agents of aesthetics, here intended to impact the *quality of the experience* (sustainable, inclusive, beautiful, and right). Increased and strengthened social bonds are themselves components of the aesthetic legacy of the design interventions.

Starting from these three primary reflections, the research has tried to question some of the issues that emerged in the study and touched upon during the symposium. Through this paper, the authors intend to frame the insights of this interdisciplinary dialogue to identify further research questions and future research directions to establish an initial network of contributors.

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