Agonistic, Convivial, and Conceptual Aesthetics in New Social Design
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1   Victor Margolin, "Social Design: From Utopia to the Good Society," in *Design for the Good Society* , Max Bruinsma, Max and Ida van Zijl eds. (Utrecht: Stichting Utrecht Biennale, 2015), 28–42; *Design for the Other 90%* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution), 2007; Cinnamon L. Jantzer and Lauren S. Weinstein, "Social Design and Neocolonialism," *Design and Culture* 6 (2013): 327–43. See http://www.desis-network.org and http://www.cumulusassociation.org.

2   For service design, see Anna Meroni and Daniela Sangiorgi, *Design for Services* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 2011); public design: Kees Dorst, *Frame Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2015); community design: Anna Meroni, ed., *Creative Communities. People Inventing Sustainable Ways of Living* (Milan: Edizioni Polidesign, 2007); design activism: Guy Julier, "From Design Culture to Design Activism," *Design and Culture* 5 (2013): 215–36 and Thomas Markussen, "The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design Between Art and Politics," *Design Issues* 29 (Winter 2013): 38–50.

3   Andrea Branzi, "Seven Degrees of Separation," in *The New Italian Design,* Silvana Annicchiarico and Andrea Branzi, eds. (Milan: Triennale di Milano, 2013), 14–17.

4   For example, see Raymond Loewy, *Never Leave Well Enough Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951); and Hekkert's recent retake of Loewy in Paul Hekkert, "Aesthetic Responses to Design. A Battle of Impulses," in *The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of Aesthetics and the Arts,* Pablo P. L. Tinio and Jeffrey K. Smith, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

In a recent catalog, Victor Margolin traced the origins of social design to utopias of various sorts, ranging from Papanek's *Design for the Real World* to the Club of Rome. Most social design continues this tradition by bringing in social causes to motivate design work that is traditional in the sense that at its heart are objects of various sorts. For example, the recent catalog *Design for the Other 90%* mostly has design projects done in developing countries to change the social conditions that produce poverty and other ills. The phrase *social design* obviously covers a range of approaches. As Jantzer and Weinstein have noted, some social designers seek to build on local definitions, whereas others place themselves in the role of an expert. The means of spreading the message varies from local to global movements exemplified by the Desis and Cumulus networks. Yet these designers find inspiration for their work from ideals beyond ordinary life.[1]

As design has moved on to immaterial forms, social design has changed shape over the past decade or so. Examples include service design, which has pushed designers to work with social processes; community design, which has introduced a new connotation, suggesting that design has to be grounded within a community; design activism, which pushes design into the political domain; and public design, which finds its clients in local communities, nongovernmental organizations, cities, and governments.[2] What I call "new social design" goes through steps similar to any other design process, and its methods are usually borrowed from other design disciplines. Its specificity lies in its definition of social as its material rather than in the objects it ends up creating. With this change has come skepticism toward utopias. In another recent catalog, Andrea Branzi has observed that the current generation of designers is happy changing the world in a molecular fashion without the utopic causes that animated his generation.[3] This attitude might well describe new social design, too.

New social design has enriched design, but it has also led to losses in some of the constitutive vocabularies of design. In particular, when the attention of design shifts to social forces, aesthetic concepts tied to products lose a good deal of their relevance.[4] There are no golden sections in social life; mass becomes detached from

objects; and harmony becomes an ideologically loaded term. One ramification of this is that new social design is puzzling to designers who saw aesthetics as design's *differentia specifica* but grew up with an aesthetic language of physical objects. For them, new social design raises the question of whether these new forms are still design.

Aesthetics in New Social Design
The mainstay of aesthetics in recent work published in design builds on Jacques Rancière's agonism and its philosophical background in structuralist Marxism. For example, DiSalvo's argument for adversarial design builds on the idea that design is an agonistic enterprise. He follows Mouffe and Laclau's political theory and, in a key paragraph, mentions Dada and Surrealism as the aesthetic context of his argument for adversarial design. Writers in design activism largely follow these definitions, though usually more in theory rather than in practice, and there are often added references to Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics as, for instance, in design activism.[5]

In response to DiSalvo, Markussen placed a "disruptive aesthetics" at the core of his definition of design activism. He revises DiSalvo's perspective by building on Rancière, who also inspired Lucy Kimbell. For Markussen, design should redefine ongoing lines of action and, by implication, reshape the structures that produce these lines.

> For Rancière, what characterizes 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 effects people's experience in a certain way: it reorients perceptual space, thereby disrupting socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging and inhabiting the everyday world.[6]

Recent writers disagree on how much change design should aim at. Whereas DiSalvo and Markussen carefully distance themselves from radical utopian claims of changing society through design, Ehn invites designers into a creative class struggle in which objects become wake-up calls that interrogate habits and their position in society. Design becomes a means of changing social structures that marginalize people in places like the immigrant neighborhoods of Malmö, Sweden.[7] For Markussen, in contrast, it is a matter of introducing heterogeneous material objects into social perception to initiate local changes. Whether this leads to the desired changes in social structures behind the social issues is a different matter.

Other recent writers, however, see aesthetics as a landscape in which many approaches may coexist. In particular, this is the case of the participative design of McCarthy and Wright, which builds on the work of John Dewey and Rancière. They

Hekkert sees aesthetics as tension between familiarity and novelty. Bardzell has recently studied HCI's resistance to aesthetics (and critical theory) in Jeffrey Bardzell, "Interaction Criticism and Aesthetics," *Proceedings of CHI 2009* (April 4–9, 2009, Boston, MA): 2357–66, and management discourse in Cameron Tonkinwise, "A Taste for Practices: Unrepressing Style in Design Thinking," *Design Studies* 32 (2011): 533–45.

5   Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004); Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011), 20; Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics (Paris: La Presses du réel, 2001); Julier, "From Design Culture to Design Activism." Julier, "From Design Culture to Design Activism." Lucy Kimbell, *Service Innovation Handbook* (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2014). Kimbell's art traces its aesthetic to Rancière. Lucy Kimbell, "An Aesthetic Inquiry into Organizing Some Rats and Some People," *Tamara: Journal for Critical Organization Inquiry* 9 (2011): 77–92.

6   Thomas Markussen, "The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism. Enacting Design between Art and Politics," *Proceedings Nordes* (Helsinki, May 2011), 4. Available at nordes.org.

7   Markussen, "The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism": 3; Pelle Ehn, Elisabeth M. Nilsson, and Richard Topgaard, eds., *Making Futures. Marginal Notes on Innovation, Design, and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2015); DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design.*

enrich their argument with references to relational aesthetics and Claire Bishop's criticism of Grant Kester's dialogical art.[8] For example, in their discussion on belonging to community, McCarthy and Wright discuss the Swiss art collective WochenKlausur. In this interpretation, the group's practice of curating debates to "redistribute the sensible by dissolving the frame that reinforces everybody's existing positions and creates a new frame in which all voices are assumed to be equal and different."[9] As McCarthy and Wright note, this practice not only brings people together, it also changes the prevailing definition of the situation.

As the landscape metaphor suggests, there may be other aesthetics at work in recent social design beyond philosophical abstractions that gloss over many differences. For example, the key examples McCarthy and Wright give show many kinds of aesthetic tendencies. Jayne Wallace's interactive jewelry is nostalgic in its feeling and it stems from co-design, while Rihanna's pop show builds on the aesthetics of the street. Social design is somewhat scant in artistic references that could clarify aesthetic choices. Following the extreme performances of Viennese Actionists would lead to a very different design approach than Philip Parreno's symbolic installations or Park Fiction's matter-of-fact political art that turned an empty plot in Hamburg into a neighborhood park. Theoretical explication is not made easier by the fact that writers build on just a few design references, above all to Dunne and Raby's work on critical design, which has several roots in art, design, and architecture.[10]

Although recent literature gives some cues as to the question of how aesthetics work in new social design, it remains unclear in terms of its implications to design practice. It is built on just a few examples from art and architecture. It is also clear that writers like Markussen routinely make references to radical philosophy, conceptual and critical art, and architecture, but these references are unspecific in terms of their aesthetic implications. Looking into recent writing on social innovation similarly gives few cues as to aesthetics. For example, Ezio Manzini's recent book does not even mention aesthetics, which is also true of recent works on co-design and co-construction.[11] Also, as we shall see, some designers openly seek to avoid and minimize aesthetic references. For these reasons and perhaps more, it is better to treat existing literature only as a starting point of analysis.

Communities of Reason: Agonistic Aesthetics

The previous section shows that many recent writers argue that the purpose of design is to provoke change in society. If one theorist has given these writers a theory of aesthetics, it is Rancière.[12] He is the spiritual home of design activism, adversarial design, Kimbell's social design, and in a pragmatic context, McCarthy and

8   Joseph McCarthy and Peter Wright, *Taking [A]part. The Politics and Aesthetics of Participation in Experience-Centered Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2015); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012). McCarthy and Wright refer to Kester's old work rather than his new work on collaborative art, but the argument would not change, compare Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Communication and Community in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) and *The One and the Many. Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

9   McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part,* 99–100.

10 As Bishop notes, recent participatory art tends to be either highly aesthetic to the point of becoming esoteric, or factual to the point in which its aesthetic disappears in the eyes of a layperson. The factual camp tends to be American and German, she notes. See Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 199–200. To see the wealth of references in critical design, see Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005).

11 Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs. An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); Liz Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers, *Convivial Toolbox. Generative Research for the Front End of Design* (Amsterdam: BIS, 2012).

12 DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design,* has been a particularly vocal proponent of agonistic thinking in interaction design.

Figure 1
Lamp shade robot by James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau. Courtesy of James Auger.

13   McCarthy and Wright, *Taking [A]part.* For an argument for pragmatic aesthetics, see Marianne Graves Petersen, Ole Iversen, Peter Gall Krogh, and Martin Ludvigsen, "Aesthetic Interaction. A Pragmatist's Aesthetics of Interactive systems," *Proceedings of DIS2004* (Cambridge, MA, August 1–4, 2004), 269–76. Shusterman's pragmatism makes a few appearances only in design literature, which centers on Dewey (see Richard Shusterman, R. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000]).

14   Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics.*

15   Dunne, for example, has distanced himself from Marxism in Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 83; Dunne and Raby tell designers to connect to everyday life rather than political ideals of the 1970s in Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* (Basel: August/Birkhäuser, 2001), 59; and DiSalvo distances adversarial design from radical politics, *Adversarial Design,* 121–22. A possible exception is Ehn et al., *Making Futures,* who see "creative class struggle" as the aim of participatory design. This interpretation echoes the first radical generation of participatory design, but its fit to contemporary participatory design is questionable, as it tends to follow Foucault and see power in dispersed rather than organized terms.

16   Jacob Beaver, Tobey Kerridge, and Sarah Pennington, eds., *Material Beliefs* (London: Goldsmiths, Interaction Research Studio, 2009). Available at materialbeliefs.com, retrieved 05/03/2010; James H. Auger, *Why Robot? Speculative Design, the Domestication of Technology and the Considered Future* (PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, London, 2012). Available at researchonline.rca.ac.uk/1660/, retrieved 03/03/2015).

Wright's participatory design.[13] Another recurrent reference is Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics,* which turned relations between people into the subject matter of art.[14] For them, the purpose of art is to bring different social worlds to the same table by breaking them out of habitual definitions leading to unproductive or even harmful outcomes. The vision of the social world driving this line of thought is sometimes one of inequality and suppression, but few of its writers are politically radical.[15]

To see how this aesthetics might shape design, take a look at a recent project that used design to shape discourse about the future. *Material Beliefs* (2006–2008) aimed at illuminating issues surrounding bioengineering technologies. It did this by provoking different people to debate these technologies and their possible implications. The parties involved were biomedical engineers and designers, as well as social scientists and the public. The project started with interviews with experts, continued with several forms of public engagement, and then developed a series of provocative designs. The designs were used as discussion items in various public encounters in London and the surrounding areas.

The framework that guided the project was called "design for debate" for a good reason. The designs created in the project were intended to provoke questions in the minds of the public and lead to debate around these questions. This enabled the public to form an opinion about whether they prefer the implications of bioengineering. The strange and provocative designs that resulted included projects like *Carnivorous Domestic Entertainment Robots.* The project built a series of robots that caught flies and mice and then extracted energy from their bodies to keep running. *Lamp Shade Robot* in Figure 1 was designed to be both strange and familiar.[16]

We find some cues to the aesthetic of Material Beliefs from the research programs associated with it. In terms of objects, its aesthetic owes a debt to critical design. In contrast to Loewy's MAYA, the aesthetics of critical design balances the familiar with the strange to break the consumer mind-set, one that trivializes objects into mere consumer goods. Yet there seems to have been an inbuilt brake that stopped designers from going to the symbolic complexities of Bourriaud's exemplary relationists like Pierre Huyghe and Philip Parreno. There is no trace of radical politics in the project.[17] Instead of utopias, this aesthetic has far more modest legitimation mechanisms. For DiSalvo, design works like a sugar coating on a bitter pill. "But the aesthetics of design, in a formal and traditional sense, still have significance in evoking the political," he notes and continues: "many examples of adversarial design leverage an expertise in the making of products and the use of formal aesthetics as a strategy for luring people into the consideration of use."[18] For their part, Dunne and Raby recently related their aesthetics to media. When critical designs leave the curated world of the study, they enter journals, magazines, and blogs, where they are detached from their theoretical roots and end up circulating as any other object. This defeats the purpose of critical design. Strangeness is required to ensure that people who see these designs outside of a research context cannot mistake them for products.[19]

The social aspect of the aesthetic of Material Beliefs takes us to less charted territory. It firmly places aesthetic into the minds of the people; in this regard, it is in line with contemporary art since the time of Duchamp. In *Placebo Project,* reported in their by now classic *Design Noir,* Dunne and Raby built exotic objects that made scientific-sounding claims that were obviously wrong. They gave these objects to several households in London, and after a period of use, interviewed and photographed them. Material Beliefs took the designs out to museums, expos, and other types of community gatherings and used them as props to discuss the implications of science. Even more recently, Bill Gaver has created a series of one-minute videos about people who have used the designs of his studio. These videos are meant as windows into their minds, not as data to be tabulated.[20]

This aesthetics leaves social forms as they are, but is still consistent with Rancière's agonistic aesthetic in at least two ways. They bring together people who are not normally connected, like scientists and ordinary people. This way, the aesthetics introduced a human element into a process that is normally devoid of human content and subject to market forces. This was also true of the entire Material Beliefs. As a whole, it enabled the exchange of viewpoints between parties only minimally concerned about each other, at best.

17 For example, Anthony Dunne, "Frequently Asked Questions," *Design Interactions Yearbook 2007* (London: Royal College of Art, 2007), 10.

18 DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design,* 102, 125.

19 Dunne and Raby in Hong Kong Design Institute, March 24, 2015. Johan Redström has reported a similar experience verbally to the author in May 2010. After being exhibited, some of his energy designs led to inquiries by manufacturers, who mistook them for industrial prototypes.

20 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*; Bill Gaver, e-mail communication, 2014. Gaver talked about (and premiered) his videos at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on April 24, 2015. The precedent is *Presence Project,* 198–99.

These observations suggest a higher aim to this aesthetic. With their designs, the designers seek to create a rich discourse that bypasses marketing propaganda, the partial truths of the market, flaws of the government, and the influence of industry-funded research. By creating this discourse, they give the best argument a fair chance of being heard and create a possibility for better collective decisions about the future. The aesthetic also builds tolerance, because while people participate in debate, they might also see how others think, and learn how they can take others into account better. This creates a kind of Kantian ideal community that respects the rules of rational argumentation on its way to a better collective future against the alienating impulses of bureaucracies, business tycoons, and other forms of rationality that—in Habermasian language—colonize life-worlds and deny people their humanity, as Tomás Maldonado might have said.[21]

Conviviality: The Aesthetics of Community Life

Another strand of aesthetics can be found from the work of those designers who put emphasis on creating a community and constructing a sense of belonging. The purpose of their work is not to shake people, change their habits, or start a process of reflection. The purpose is to create new forms of community interaction that helps people cope with everyday life. The definition of the situation is changeable but always builds on local social forms. This aesthetic has its roots in design research in Milan. In particular, it characterizes work in the Desis network, which aims to empower social communities to produce their own social goods.[22]

The aesthetics is found in the ways people interact rather than in objects or social forms that designers create. It may be hard to put into words, but it exists in the new interactions that designers have helped create and in the outcomes of these interactions. Says Anna Meroni about *Nutrire Milano,* a project seeking to reconnect Milan to the surrounding agricultural area:

> Of course the more "conventional" idea of aesthetics is still important: the "beauty" and care of the physical spaces (interior and exterior design), of the visual evidences (logo, communication, touch points), of the tools for any interaction. This is part of service design in the more traditional sense and it is very important. In collaborative services this is one of the most complex part to manage and, in a way, "direct." Let's say that, sometimes one needs to re-set the direction . . . Nevertheless, talking about the appeal of Feeding Milano . . . we have always talked about the aesthetic of interaction, and in particular the sense of "conviviality."[23]

21 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2. Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); also Tomás Maldonado, *Design, Nature, and Revolution. Toward a Critical Ecology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), esp. 22.

22 Desis sits somewhere between traditional social design and new social design. The systemic thinking behind its global expansion has utopic features, but its aesthetic aligns it with the molecular tactics of process art, as we will see below.

23 Anna Meroni, e-mail correspondence, October 15, 2015. A good description of Nutrire Milano in English is in Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs.* Conviviality is not to be confused with the "aesthetics of interaction" in interaction design, where it has come to mean explorations into the aesthetics of action and attempts to translate these explorations into interactive objects. See Graves Petersen et al., "Aesthetic Interaction."

As Meroni points out here, the aim of the designers is not to challenge design as usual. Rather, they do their usual design process to make sure graphics, physical objects, and websites look and feel like design. These designs capture the spirit of the times and work with it rather than seek to change the way people see their situation.

When aesthetics is understood as conviviality, it becomes detached from objects. It is the property of community involved in design. Because the designers do not claim to have aesthetic authority over the community, they create conditions for a community to emerge rather than orchestrate it in detail. When in action, this community creates its own definitions of what is salient and what is not. This indigenous, emergent aesthetic rides over the designers' aesthetic (see Figure 2).

In the convivial aesthetic, the purpose of design comes from the problem and the argument behind the project. In Nutrire Milano, for instance, the purpose of the community-building effort was to make the food chain more local and thus more sustainable. In another study, Meroni created communities in new housing estates before they were built. Her aim was to build a community that would exist before people move in for organizing things like carpools, babysitters, and handymen who live elsewhere in the building. The belief behind the project is that these new social forms will help people organize their activities in ways that enrich their lives.

This approach shares the key word of *conviviality* with Rirkrit Tiravanija's process art, and the basic idea of bringing people together to create a community that helps in everyday

24 See Francesca Grassi and Rirkrit Tira-
    vanija, *A Retrospective (Tomorrow Is
    Another Fine Day)* (Zurich: J. P. Ringier,
    2007). Bishop points out that while Tira-
    vanija's work intensifies convivial rela-
    tions in a small group, it also creates
    outsiders, *Artificial Hells,* 210–11. Kester
    tells about a Tiravanija exhibition in
    Cologne Kunstverein, which took place
    while the police was breaking a home-
    less camp right outside the venue. This
    incident invoked criticism from the press
    and the local art community, *Conversa-
    tion Pieces,* 105. How an artist works
    with the community is another open
    question; for example, Gabriel Orozco
    positions himself on the rim of the com-
    munity, not at its center, as Tiravanija,
    see Jessica Morgan, *GO: Gabriel Orozco*
    (London: Tate Modern, 2011), 25.

25 Jay Koh criticized his countryman Tira-
    vanija for forgetting the larger social
    forces behind his focus on conviviality in
    the *Tomorrow Is Another Day* exhibition
    in Cologne, see Kester, *Conversation
    Pieces,* 105.

26 And, we might add, as activists, in
    spreading the outcomes of the project
    through an acupunctural strategy, see
    Manzini, *Design, When Everybody
    Designs.*

27 Tuuli Mattelmäki, Kirsikka Vaajakallio,
    and Ilpo Koskinen, "What Happened to
    Empathic Design," *Design Issues* 30
    (Autumn 2014): 67–77; Katja Soini,
    *Towards Resident-Oriented Housing
    Modernization with Collaborative Design*
    (Aalto: Helsinki, 2015); Jayne Wallace,
    Peter Wright, Joseph McCarthy, David P.
    Green, James Thomas, and Patrick Oliv-
    ier, "A Design-led Inquiry into Person-
    hood in Dementia," *Proceedings CHI*
    (April 27–May 2, 2013, Paris, France),
    2617–26. A few recent design exhibitions
    have also treated design as found object,
    including Naoto Fukusawa and Jasper
    Morrison's *Supernormal and Konstantin
    Grcic's Design Real.*

28 Putting a concept over material and skill
    was typical to conceptual art. The use of
    objet trouvés, trash, postcards, and con-
    cepts aimed at directing the public to
    think about the concept behind a piece
    instead of admiring the artist's skill. See
    the review by Peter Osborne, *Conceptual
    Art* (London: Phaidon, 2011).

life is similar to his art. This approach also clearly goes beyond Tiravanija's small-scale actions performed in galleries with ready-made objects used in the dining tables and tea ceremonies. Not being closed to the confines of the gallery, Nutrire Milano had to confront the larger social structures that function around design. This made the designers vulnerable to actions by forces beyond their control. For example, the first farmers' market of Nutrire Milano in Largo Marinai d'Italia in eastern Milan was closed because of local opposition.[24] Whereas one of the criticisms of process art has been its insulation from political issues in society, Meroni's work meets this criticism. Unlike process art, Nutrire Milano was also meant to live beyond the project.[25]

In this approach, researchers become co-designers of the community they are building. To be consistent in their approach, aesthetics should also be co-designed. They can also, however, say that designing objects and designing community are two different matters. This is what happened in Nutrire Milano, where designers were both participants and observers and executed their designs largely in the studio at the university. As researchers, their interest was conviviality; as designers, objects.[26] Their approach was clearly different from the agonistic world view in terms of aesthetic implications and the ways they chose to work with the community.

Conceptual Aesthetic: Aesthetic as a Found Object

A third approach to aesthetics springs from myriad wellsprings sharing one trait: a willingness to push aesthetics to the background of the project. Good examples of this approach are empathic design and Jayne Wallace's recent work on interactive jewelry.[27] Both have an aesthetic, but they find aesthetic from the activities and objects of a community rather than from the design world. They work by creating small, barely noticeable interventions rather than provoking debate or creating communities. Although these designers have different aims, they all push the designers' skill to the background to foreground the design concept, which builds on local social forms rather than invents new forms.[28]

One example of how empathic designers worked with aesthetics is a community project in east Helsinki in 2012. In *Ave Mellunkylä!*, a group of designers moved their design studio into the neighborhood with the expressed aim of learning to live like the locals to better develop a long-term vision for the renovation of the suburb. They organized several activities during the project, including things like video competitions for local preteens and teens and design workshops for the adult population. The goal was to introduce new habits that would stay in the community after the
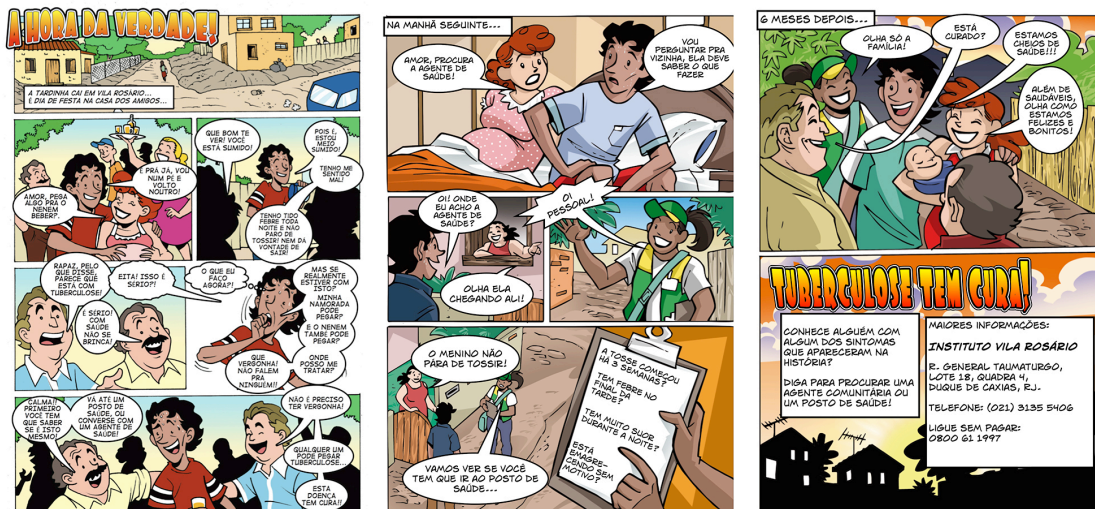
Figure 3
A tuberculosis booklet from *Vila Rosario*.
Courtesy of Andrea and Marcelo Judice.

29   The designers were Katja Soini and Heidi Paavilainen. For Ave Mellunkyla!, see https://issuu.com/lahio2072/docs/design_collaboration_____thoughts_

30   Some famous examples are John Baldessari's *Commissioned Paintings* and Donald Judd's sculptures made by iron workers after the *Primary Structures* exhibition (1966). In these works, the artist commissioned the actual craft to break the idea that originality lies in the "touch" of an artist.

project was over.[29] Their approach was consistent with the instrumental aesthetics of commercial industrial designers, who see aesthetics as a matter of subjective taste that can somehow be captured with tools like mood boards, photographs, and sketches. Unlike commercial designers who capture local aesthetics to sell more, in Ave Mellunkylä!, the designers captured local aesthetics for social purposes.

In this approach, the outcome was a series of product-like designs that were adapted to the everyday world without effort, as if they were ordinary commercial products. By bracketing their aesthetic intentions, the designers pushed their views to the background and concentrated on facilitating a process in which the community took leadership in design. As in conceptual art, the designers of Ave Mellunkylä! wanted to avoid seducing people with their aesthetic and technical skills. The politics behind their work built on the notion of facilitation; it left the right to define the world and its aesthetics to the members of the community, who would be living in that world.[30]

The conceptual approach gives room to several interpretations of aesthetics. For example, when Jayne Wallace was constructing her interactive pieces of jewelry, she worked with several Alzheimer's patients, who became her co-designers. As a skilled goldsmith, she worked as craftpersons have traditionally worked: she listened to the stories of the patients to turn them into physical pieces. She put her own aesthetic sensibilities into the background. The measure of success was not showcasing her skills but whether the patients felt that the pieces she created were expressions of their vanishing selves. The result was a nostalgic reflection of days gone by in the north of England. The result could hardly have been more different in Vila Rosario, a project by Brazilian designers Marcelo and Andrea Judice in Vila Rosario, Rio de Janeiro. Their project helped local health agents fight tuberculosis. The Judices

captured the local aesthetic of the village with probes, several projective tools, and ethnographic methods. They transferred their findings to their designs by building a fictional world out of the things they saw in Vila Rosario. The result was a panorama of life thoroughly familiar to the denizens of the neighborhood (see Figure 3).[31]

Although in some ways reminiscent to Nutrire Milano, this approach was different. It did not aim at creating a community, but steering an existing community gently though a set of small-scale designs that intended to produce a social good. The success of Vila Rosario depended on the small-scale designs, not creating a community spirit. Although the designs were intended to change community perceptions of tuberculosis, they were not baits intended to capture attention or initiate reflection that would provoke the reorganization of perceptions. Their approach was in line with Andrea Branzi's vision of molecular designers, happy to change the world one tiny notch at a time. Their aesthetics, like Wallace's, aimed at capturing the local vernacular.[32]

The conceptual aesthetic has a subtle message to impart to social designers. It tells the designers to push their own aesthetic judgment to the background and build on popular aesthetics of the people. This may sound consistent with the instrumental attitude to aesthetics typical of many industrial designers, who capture the spirit of the times for commercial purposes.[33] The difference to commercial design comes from aesthetic reasoning. The benefit of pushing designers' aesthetic to the background is that people take the designers' aesthetic easily into their hearts because its origins are in the community and its life. Communities have their own aesthetic, which can be treated as a found object. Thus, behind the surface lies a deeper aesthetic reasoning that brings conceptual art to mind. When taken to the extreme, it is in fact the very absence of any conspicuous design aesthetics that makes this approach noticeable and interesting.

Discussion

This article has explored what happens to design when it sees social forces and processes as its material and pushes the world of physical objects to the background. With this shift, traditional object-bound aesthetic concepts lose a good deal of their validity and may give a false impression of new social design as social science rather than design. The question that put the paper into motion was designers' worry about whether social design is good design or design at all, as it is not graspable with concepts inherited from the industrial era. In some ways, this is a question of legacy, of how much designers want to stick to their conceptual legacy. At the heart of it, however, is another concern that goes to the self-image of the discipline: is aesthetic a sine qua non of design?

31   For example, Andres Judice sought guidance from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in her thesis; Andrea Judice, *Design for Hope* (Aalto: Helsinki, 2014).

32   Branzi, "Seven Degrees of Separation."

33   This way of working has affinities with many trends in contemporary participatory and collaborative art. For example, Rick Lowe's *Project Row Houses* in Houston's Third Ward treated the local community as a found object. With his colleagues, Lowe bought row houses in the neighborhood with money from foundations supporting art and rebuilt the houses to keep local residents in the Third Ward. Inspired by John Biggers and Joseph Beuys, Project Row Houses created a place for people to live. It sided with local politicians against the interests of real estate business. See projectrowhouses.org.

Currently, there are at least three different ways new social designers understand aesthetics. In want of better terms, we have called these agonistic, convivial, and conceptual. There are undeniable differences in those political, theoretical, and philosophical constructs that animate these approaches, but all three locate aesthetics outside the market and are ill at ease with Raymond Loewy's formula "most advanced yet acceptable" or Hekkert's retake of it.[34] When the approach is agonistic, designs are certainly not meant to be acceptable; instead, they are strange and used as interventions that lead to debate. When the aim is conviviality, the aesthetic is located in the community and its interactions, and the aim of design is to create a base for conviviality. When the approach is conceptual, the aesthetic is again located in everyday life, while designers' aesthetic is pushed to the back. A new social design project does not have to obviously look like design; it can do its work in more subtle ways.

The story of the relationship between new social design and postwar art is largely unwritten, but a few observations are possible. When art went through its six years of dematerialization, artists expanded their work to include found objects and everyday life in pop, neo-Dada, new realisms, and Fluxus, to materials like trash and earth in land art, to activities in events, happenings, and performances, to language and information in conceptual art, and to social relations, like in Joseph Beuys's social sculpting and Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. It is fair to say that like their precursors in art, new social designers have not prioritized to any particular material, which may partly explain why members of older design disciplines can find social design puzzling. Like the postwar artists, new social designers have shown that it is possible to dematerialize design to the point that material reality does not exactly disappear but becomes a marginal issue.

As we have seen, however, new social designers have split on how to work with this margin. One wedge focuses on skill. A legacy of conceptual art and minimalism has been a push of the artist's technical mastery to the sidelines to give priority to the conceptual idea behind the artwork. Those with a conceptual or convivial approach sympathize with this policy, but those with an agonistic world view find instrumental uses for skill. The implications of this run deep. In their attempt to construct imaginative and strange designs that create debate, agonistic designers tend to find inspiration from Dada, Surrealism and Situationism. The convivial and conceptual cousins of agonistic designers tend to locate aesthetic in found objects and social forms, facilitating existing social forms rather than reassembling them. In comparison to designs from their agonistic peers, the convivial and conceptual designs seem commodity-like. In some areas of practice, however, all three approaches convene. The uses of photographs owe more to design portfolios and family albums

34   Loewy, *Never Leave Well Enough Alone,* and Hekkert, "Aesthetic Responses to Design."

than to documentary photography, advertisement, or the reflective identity plays or digital manipulations in galleries and biennales.[35] The bottom line between these approaches is also shared. All start from design rather than art. All aim to produce social forms and objects intended to be used in daily life, not shown in galleries.[36]

As a note for further research, we may record one observation. The agonistic approach focuses on creating objects to provoke change. The assumption of the writer was that they would also have a radical concept of social forms, and that they would seek inspiration from the rich heritage of art from happenings, performances, Artaud's theater, John Cage, or even Cabaret Voltaire and Surrealist provocations. Instead, they use conventional social forms such as debates, exhibitions, and fairs to curate the discussions around their projects. The story of the extent of artistic references in new social design remains to be told, however, and there is a plenty of room for exploration.

It is impossible to say whether the observations of this article about new social design have applications to traditional forms of social design. The writer's conjecture is that most likely they do. For example, *Design for the Other 90%* shows plenty of designs that attempt to solve social problems with normal products. This approach is close to what this article has defined as conceptual aesthetics. Some traditional social designers make political statements that appear to have agonistic qualities, however.[37] If this conjecture is correct, the main difference between social design and new social design does not lie in aesthetics but in the fact that the latter takes social forms as its major topic. Obviously, more research is needed.

Is aesthetics, then, a sine qua non of new social design? As this article shows, the answer must be yes, but not in any obvious way. Ultimately, aesthetics in new social design is a matter of conceptual and philosophical commitments. The answer to the question lies in these commitments rather than in any easily visible form of design work. Finally then, this article must make a call for heightened sensitivity to the aims, ambitions, and theoretical background of new social design, and for treating new social design as an important, emergent pursuit worthy of further investigation.

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35 The uses of photography in social design seem to owe little to art. In terms of capture, social designers are clearly closer to rough conceptual works of Ruscha and Graham rather than the documentaries of Evans or Frank, the sexy technical perfection of Newton, or the elaborate reflective and digital manipulations of Sherman, Wall, Calle, or Gursky. The relationship of photography to social design, of course, is another story to be told. One of the few conscious references to photography in interaction design is Symbiots, a project in Stockholm by Jenny Bergström, Ramia Mazé, Johan Redström, and Anna Vallgårda, "Symbiots: Conceptual Interventions into Urban Energy Systems," *Proceedings 2nd Nordic Design Research Conference,* 2009, Oslo, Norway. Accessed from nordes.org, August 17, 2015.

36 Again, it is important not to generalize too much. There are art projects that last for decades, like Beuys's *7000 Oaks* in Kassel, Germany, and Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses. Even conceptual social designers would be proud of these projects, though they would surely like to set their work outside art institutions and find references to their works in government reports and economy pages rather than in catalogs or, if they are consistent in their beliefs, design award lists.

37 As in Krzysztof Wodiczko's vehicles for the homeless, an early artistic example of social design. Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles. Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).