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An Inclusive Design Dialogue on Ethics and Aesthetics

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Abstract

One of the many definitions of inclusive design is that it is a user-led approach to design. To date its focus has been on ‘critical’ users, in particular disabled people. As such, there is pressure to design environments that meet the often urgent and complex demands of these users. Designers, uncertain of their knowledge, rely heavily on user input and guidance, often resulting in designs that are ‘solution’ driven (rather than solution seeking) and short term; users focus on what they need, not what they might need. This paper argues that design needs to reclaim an equal presence within inclusive design. It proposes that the ‘weakness’ of design lies in the uneasy and at times conflicting relationship between ethics and aesthetics. The paper itself is constructed around a dialogue between two academics, one concerned with critical user needs, the other with aesthetics, but both directed towards the support of design quality.

Keywords: Ethics; aesthetics; design quality

Dear Kathryn,

As someone who has been part of an inclusive design dialogue since its early days I have taken my lead, like others in the UK, from the USA movement of Universal Design. I have for many reasons stayed loyal to the term ‘inclusive design’ not because I think there are different genres of design but rather that it reinforces something that we, as architects, are apt to forget, ie that the spaces we create ‘house’ the activities/thoughts/lives of all people in our society – not just those who pay for them.

In the long term, it would be preferable to return to using the term ‘design’, however, until universal/inclusive design and ‘good’ design represent the same thing, I will continue to promote the terms ‘universal’/‘inclusive’ design in order to call for design processes that address the needs of all people.

But I am uneasy with this position since universal design has consistently side-stepped issues of aesthetics, and indeed the seven principles of universal design (Preiser, 2001) make no mention of the aesthetic value of design. Similarly, the design world, that I also occupy, is uncomfortable with the pressures that, for example, designing for disabled people, participatory design or public consultation put on its precious and fragile design process. For both interest groups, ethics and aesthetics are, more often than not, diametrically opposed.

Within my own career I occasionally hide my interest in designing for ‘critical’ users from colleagues who understand me to be fully engaged in pursuing an architectural aesthetic. Likewise, it is difficult to explain to a colleague who campaigns for accessible toilets that I also believe that learning to design is essentially a designer-focused and ‘closed’ process. This ‘isolation’ of design education, from real-world issues, represents its essential quandary in respect to imbuing ethics within its processes.

As someone who has been involved in landscape design and aesthetics over many years I would welcome your comments on this phenomenon both in relation to the general relationship between design and aesthetics but also within the context of landscape design.

Dear Ruth,

Appreciation and understanding of the psychology of place and space – understanding what places make us feel and why – is a lost art, not only because of the 17th-century view of perception, but because this ‘disastrous idea’ has been reinforced by aesthetic theory and further exacerbated by recent anti-ocular philosophy. These factors conspire to make consideration of things visual deeply unfashionable and in current design theory at any rate, almost beneath contempt.

The stalking ground for the aesthetic sensibility defined by Kant, Baumgarten and those who succeed them, is the foggy perceptual world where ‘impressions’, ‘sense data’, ‘qualia’, ‘experiences’ or ‘brain processes’ are clarified, ordered or structured. Rich pickings lie in this interface insinuated between our minds and the external world. The mechanics of the process varies depending on fashion, time and context, but fundamentally something, invariably universal or archetypal in nature, is thought to stimulate the senses (subconscious or body) to provoke an aesthetic response.

Various options are offered up in an attempt to shed the elitist tag of the aesthetic, to make it more popular and down to earth either, for example, by showing the aesthetic nature of scientific thought or the consensual, rational basis of aesthetic discourse, including the identification of the somatic, the haptic and the experiential. Tempting, this transference of the ‘aesthetic faculty’ to the body is in effect, another way of describing a sensory kind of knowing. All are equally mystifying and undemocratic.

The question to ask is if there really is any need for “an aesthetic theory or an aesthetic programme” (Rorty, 2001) no matter how poetically or delicately it is defined. This is not to reduce the impact or significance of an aesthetic response, but to suggest that there are no universal qualities of beauty, no perfect forms for towns, or civic squares that represent the essence of democracy, freedom, morality and rationality to sense or feel. Neither is there a neutral, objective reality to evaluate and measure to give us the true answers. Aesthetics beyond psychology deals with the complex, multi-layered, artistic and intellectual nature of our responses and reactions. It understands these responses are culturally formed and that they have political and social connotations. But it does not have a thing to do with how we think.

To examine the implications of aesthetics without psychology is a small but significant shift enabling us to have a “firm grasp of the materialist world” (Bryson, 1999), but not from an outdated formalist position. It requires considering a world without universal truths, recognising the elusive ambiguity of language, the intelligent sensibility of feelings and accepting the idea that the main philosophical basis for distinct conceptual spheres and different ways of knowing no longer stands. This makes it possible to have, as Dewey suggests, “perfect integration of ‘manner and content, form and substance’” (Dewey, 1997). On this basis it is possible to teach the art of design. What becomes significant is not the medium we work with – words, space, or time – but the manner of the practice. How elegantly and artistically have ideas been investigated and transformed within a particular medium.

Dear Kathryn,

Are you arguing that aesthetics as a distinct term should be abandoned – and is it the separation between aesthetics and ethics in the mind of the teacher/designer that is the underlying problem? If this is the case for aesthetics then do we also abandon the term ‘ethics’? Is it also the case that by making areas distinct and ‘different’ that there is a tendency to try to universalise them, potentially or eventually generating a doctrine that represents only a small and relatively unrepresentative group? I can see how you might fear that but isn’t everything open to misuse and distortion? Surely at times it is necessary to make things distinct in order to get some intellectual ‘grasp’ on them, with the proviso that this is an abstracted and hence limited state.

It is the conclusion of your argument in the penultimate sentence “What becomes significant is not the medium we work with – words, space, or time – but the manner of the practice”, that I most identify with when designing with/teaching an inclusive approach. BUT architects also have a pride and expertise in the medium they work with, and whilst it is not the medium itself that creates useful spaces but rather the process (a process that should include others), it is the architect’s expertise and, perhaps more importantly, the architect’s ‘motivation’ in their medium that allows them to design these spaces. Perhaps here we stumble on the problem, replicated in the previous paragraph, that it is the architect’s pride/expertise/aesthetic skills in working with the medium that ‘drowns out’ the needs of others.

Hence I would argue that, alongside the ‘closed and isolated’ process of becoming a designer, there has to be a process of opening or externalising the nascent designer to the reality of their designs and their impact on the lives of others. One process cannot follow the other but, by necessity, should run in parallel, informing the other. This requires a distinctly different pedagogy than that used in traditional design schools. The focus has to be taken off the results/products and put onto the process of aligning these conflicting worlds.

Personally, I struggle less with distinct realms of aesthetics/ethics and more with the fact that they are rarely allowed/encouraged to converse with one another – not even within the same individual. So my next question is: How do you relate or exemplify this dilemma, crucial to the future of inclusive design, within your own design studio teaching?

Dear Ruth,

The dilemma is philosophical. It can be resolved by seeking other ways of describing what is going on in the studio. This means teaching without relying on the dichotomy between word and image, objective facts and subjective opinions, logical processes or intuitive reactions, aesthetics and function. When teaching students to be spatially, intellectually and artistically aware, this means no pictures without words and no words without pictures and not even contemplating the idea that aesthetics is something that can be peeled off from practical design and saved for special occasions.

What needs to be abandoned – if we are to teach students to look carefully and understand what they see – is the idea that there is a separate conceptual sphere in the mind that is stimulated in response to aesthetic experience. This is what makes it impossible to teach and isolates aesthetics from everyday experience. The idea that aesthetic and design skill reside in the arcane world of the sensory also undermines the notion of expertise, which I agree is absolutely critical in design. It is part of the same paradigm that insists that design is closed and isolated, that to consider form is egotistical and that designing requires externalising

things that are in our mind's eye. It is why we deny the social, political and economic significance of the way things look.

All in all, this makes the designing part of design (as opposed to the consulting, negotiating and facilitating part) vulnerable. It makes it almost inevitable that other things are brought in – user studies, consultations, public participation, ecological imperatives, ethical stances and the like – as alternatives to, and to actually legitimise the avoidance of, talking about form. Form is supposed to just happen, magically, emerging after all these other issues have been considered. And as long as the net of consultees has been thrown widely enough, does it really matter what it looks like?

The alternative is to consider aesthetics beyond psychology. This deals with the complex, multi-layered, artistic and intellectual nature of our responses to what we see. It understands them to be culturally and socially formed and to have political and social connotations; making sense of our reactions to what we see through knowledge, experience and critical reflection. These attributes are also used to make artistic, critical judgements, not only in relationship with the criticism of ideas, but also how these ideas relate to form, visual quality, texture and composition, in other words, careful analysis of the 'visual particularity' of what is seen. This becomes more informed, not contaminated or corrupted by knowledge. It is open to interpretation, opinions shift and change as we learn more and more about the subject matter.

It does matter what things looks like – no matter who the user group is. Looking good is part of the function of place, space and sustainable economic growth. It is not good enough to think that 'if poetry happens all good and well' as though this can be left to chance. This is one prejudice we need to overcome in inclusive design.

There is another. Neither designing with aesthetic awareness nor designing inclusively should be thought of as optional or a compromise, but as an integral part of how we design, irrespective of place or context. A large part of this responsibility falls on us as tutors to raise expectations of this in the design studio, in the way we assess, and the way we critique. If we present it as a conflict it will be perceived as one.

Realising that all users are not the mythical average, fit, healthy 35-year-old white western males (Goldsmith, 1995) is a salutary lesson and one that many students haven't considered. Researching the constraints and requirements of a range of disabilities demonstrates the complexity and conflicting nature of the problem of inclusive design. It also becomes clear that although the provision of technical information and standard specifications is essential, these do not provide design solutions. To design well, aesthetically, artistically, functionally and practically requires the imaginative analysis, synthesis, interpretation and application of this information alongside research gleaned from the brief, concept and response to the place.

Dear Kathryn,

Two final comments: Firstly I'm sure you don't mean to restrict aesthetics to their external appearance. In car design, for example, the 'desired' aesthetic lies as much in the lines of the car as the sound of the engine, the feel of the gears or the smell of the leather. And within the world of inclusive design you might lose the audience of those with a visual impairment – a concise and poignant illustration of the complexity of being inclusive!

Lastly, whilst you suggest that aesthetic responses and ethical approaches should not be understood or portrayed as being in conflict, I am quite at ease with this. The tension between the two is, to my mind, more likely, if addressed openly, to increase people's understanding of each other's needs, and ultimately the value of design. So let's not hide the conflict between aesthetics and ethics but learn instead to manage it.

Thanks for your time Kathryn.

Key Concluding Points

- 'Inclusive design' and 'design' worlds respectively avoid issues of aesthetics and ethics. As a consequence, inclusive design and 'good' design maintain a distance based on suspicion.
- It is not the medium we work with – words, space, or time – but the manner in which we practice that is significant.
- Alongside the 'closed and isolated' process of becoming a designer, there must be a process of opening or externalising the nascent designer to the reality of their designs and their impact on the lives of others.
- Inclusive design teaching must be done without relying on the dichotomy between word and image, objective facts and subjective opinions, logical processes or intuitive reactions, aesthetics and function.
- Exposing and managing the conflicts between aesthetic responses and ethical approaches can result in better understanding of people's needs and the value of design.

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