A taste for practices: Unrepressing style in design thinking

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The current vogue for design in management discourses results in abstractions of the design process that repress the role of aesthetic judgments. This paper offers an explanation as to why design-as-styling is being neglected or concealed, and then explains what is at stake. It theorizes that a key aspect of the agency of designing, as the creation of artifacts to facilitate activities, lies in this taste literacy of designers. The framework for the argument of this paper is Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ and the notion of ‘style’ as proposed by Fernando Flores and his coauthors. The paper argues that designers are hermeneutists of proximal taste regimes, for the possibilities of new styles of action.

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It is strange that in all the current talk about “design thinking,” almost no reference is ever made to the work of the Design Thinking Research Symposium, which has been collating and initiating innovative yet careful and extensive research into the nature of the design process for two decades; nor indeed has much reference been made to any of the research published explicitly in relation to the cognition of expert designers - for example, Lawson (1980, 2004), Rowe (1987), and more recently Lawson and Dorst (2009) (though this series of omissions from the literature has been addressed in Nigel Cross’s recently published Design Thinking (2011)). What is being promoted as “design thinking” seems content to extrapolate from the internal reflective practice of a design firm (IDEO, in the case of Brown, 2009) or from a selection of interviews with design principals by management educators (in the case of Martin, 2009). What is lost in this exporting of design thinking from designing?

1 Refashioning design thinking

It might seem that “design thinking” [double quotation marks from now on will signal the current popular discourse of design-based innovation and management, as opposed to research into the cognitive processes of designers designing] is design minus the material practice (Burdick, 2009; Kimbell, 2009). However, “design thinking” is foremostly defined as the sort of action research that comes from failure-friendly, iterative prototyping in contexts of
immersive social research. Without referencing any of the research of designing, “design thinking” does acknowledge that this experimentalism involves a kind of problem-definition/solution-proposition co-evolution — see for instance Jennifer Riel’s box-insert in Martin (2009: pp. 94–5) on design as wicked problem-setting. So there is a practice to design thinking.

What must be removed from designing to make it appropiable by managers is rather, it seems: aesthetics, by which I mean, anything to do with form-giving, the pleasing appearance and feel of a design. Roger Martin’s The Design of Business makes no reference at all to aesthetics. It quotes with approval Hugh de Pree discussing the authority granted to designers over the development of the Aeron Chair, now an iconic form, that “Designing... comes to grips with the very essence of a problem, from the inside out, as opposed to ‘styling,’ which concerns itself largely with the distinctive mode of presentation or with the externals of a given solution.” (2009, 113) Tim Brown’s Change by Design opens with a first chapter that is explicit about the need for strategic design to displace design’s aestheticism: “Getting under your skin, or How Design Thinking is about more than Style.”

At one level this is understandable. If “design thinking” is primarily ‘design for non-designers,’ then “design thinking” must be able to be done without becoming a designer, without having to adopt the lifestyle, working environment and habits of designers; for instance, their penchant for being concerned about fashionable appearances, their own and that of everything around them. But in another way it is strange that almost none of the 4–7 dot point lists circulating about what is involved in being a design thinker – see for example the compilations of Wroblewski (2006, 2007, 2008), which at least include pattern recognition and visual story telling – mention any of the habits of designers; forever browsing different media for a sense of different formal trends in different areas of design; making large collections of liked and inspiring examples (on this see Keller, Visser, van der Lugt, & Stappers, 2009); constantly critiquing with a distinctive lexicon the aesthetic quality of the designed output of partners, peers and students (on this see Strickfaden & Heylighen, 2010).

1.1 Constraining styles
Even if current promoters of “design thinking” as strategic management had consulted the findings of groups such as the Design Thinking Research Symposium, they would not have been clearly redirected toward the aesthetic side of designing. Style is a primary concern of Rowe’s, but as a morphological constraint of particular design disciplines and the cultures within which they are practiced, rather than as a variable that is distinctive to the problem-responding done by designers (see also for example, Chan, 2001). Lawson has long argued that style is an imposition retrospectively read onto completed designs by critics rather than a concern manifest in grounded theorizing of the design process. For Lawson, aesthetic styles may be sources
of primary generators, abductive ways of finding appropriate design gambits, but these must then be reformed and validated by more functional requirements. Dorst mentions in *Understanding Design* that the (Design Thinking Research) knowledge-base around form-giving is weak (2003, 36) but has an entry for “Good Taste” (181). There are however no index entries for aesthetics or style in *Design Expertise* (Lawson & Dorst, 2009), though there is a discussion of form-describing language used by designers (following Tovey in relation to automobile design and Eckert and Stacy in relation to fashion and helicopter design) and also a rather critical discussion of form-driven design in relation to the iconic work of Stark and Utzon. Journals such as *Design Studies* contain studies of consumer perception of product form (for example Crilly, Moultrie, & Clarkson, 2004), but the theoretical framework tends to consider form as only one outer layer of a design, and consumer attitudes as fixed constraints — though the exception is Janlert & Stolterman’s rich proposal to consider product design in terms of character or personality (1997; see more recently Desmet, Nicolaës, & Schoormans, 2008), a metaphor that is less layered and more integrated, and one that suggests that styling is a rhetorically variable aspect of interaction design and not just an environmental constraint into which the design must fit. It could also be noted that communication design, and even more so, fashion — areas of design practice that are especially concerned with styling — are rare foci for research of design (though in *Design Studies* on textile and knitwear design, see Petre, Sharp, & Johnson, 2007, and Eckert & Stacey, 2000).

Yet surely, if design is about changing situations into preferable ones, one of the main criteria, or at least a necessary if not sufficient criterion, as to what counts as preferable that is particular to designers, is: increased aesthetic pleasure? Are we in a situation where all the attention being paid to design, whether researched or promotional, is nevertheless missing one of the primary aspects of designing? And does it matter if design is cast, by “design thinking” promotions or Design Thinking Research, as not primarily an aesthetic practice?

What follows is motivated by these rough observations. It takes the conspicuous absence of styling from “design thinking” as a prompt to sketch out a realigned theoretical framework for future research of design; one that attempts to outline how it might be hypothesized that designers think ‘through style’; how they solve problems or find problems and improve situations by having a stylistic predilection.

**1.2 Restyling design**

Why might “design thinking” be repressing design as styling? Current promotions of “design thinking” are clearly aimed at enhancing the power, and so the earning capacity, of designers. To move designers up the consultancy hierarchy also means moving them earlier in the process, extracting them from their
Aesthetics are also thought to be subjective. The managerialism that is interested in “design thinking” claims to be shifting to less algorithmic modes of operation, but it could be that the stylistic aspects of design remain too incalculable. It could also be that in a related way, aesthetics is too political. Sam Ladner has conjectured that design thinking is a way of concealing the politics of management (2009). Aesthetics, as inherently subjective and/or cultural, foreground interpersonal politics. Despite its commitment to failure-friendly iterations, perhaps the risks involved in styling are too much for “design thinking”.

These suggestions might go some way to explaining why aesthetics are downplayed by “design thinking,” but what is at stake in these tactical evasions of what intuitively seems central to design, as a thinking or a practice? How does ‘style’ help designers design?

2 Taste practices

It is Pierre Bourdieu (1984) who has done the most to make clear that aesthetic judgments are inherently and forcefully political. Precisely because questions of beauty and taste appear natural, or universal, they are powerful ways of reinforcing hierarchical distinctions between people. They make visceral — in the disgust or desire one feels for what others wear, or like, or use — levels of cultural capital, in other words, which non-necessary values one has been able to afford to use, learn about or discuss. Everyday semi-conscious decisions about the components of the built environment that we choose to dwell with comprise a competitive game with tacit but evolving rules.

Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984) is an entertaining and convincing read because of the empirical way in which it demonstrates homologies between different fields of taste. The numerous portraits provided throughout the book build up overlaid maps of people’s tastes, so that the reader can begin to see parallels between someone’s literal taste, what they like and do not like to eat, and their taste in household furnishings, or the size and nature of their household book and music libraries, etc.

Bourdieu’s sociology in *Distinction* then appears as reflexive version of an expertise that we all more or less have as we attempt to read the financial,
social and cultural capital of people we meet. Film art directors are exemplary Bourdieusians, finding ways of giving us rapidly comprehensive portraits of a character via the artifacts visible in a 5 s camera pan about that character’s room. Glimpsing that poster, those objet d’art, and these kinds of clothes, allows me as a viewer to make quick hypotheses about the person whose room this is, about their class, their level of education and financial standing, for instance - but also, especially if you are a (interaction oriented) designer, of what they are capable, their facilities with various kinds of activities.

In most uses of Bourdieu’s work, and indeed, in *Distinction* itself, the emphasis in these cross-field parallels tends to remain at the level of selections of signifiers. However, importantly, there are practical aspects too. *Distinction* suggests that people who select the same television shows from all that is on offer will tend to not only wear similar kinds of clothes, but will also have similar levels of knowledge about fashion. They will tend to share ways of talking about fashion, and they will share how they go about buying and wearing clothes. In other words, taste regimes also manifest as practices, in this case the practice of being more or less fashionable.

Bourdieu makes this point when indicating that people from differing levels of social and cultural capital may ‘like’ the same image, but for very different reasons, or rather, because that image is part of very different practices of image appreciation. A black and white image of an old woman’s hands can be liked for its formal compositional properties by someone practicing a kind a high bourgeois art historical appreciation, whereas it can be appreciated as a sympathetic portrait of suffering by someone practicing a kind of petit bourgeois empathetic humanism (1984, pages 44–5).

Bourdieuian readings of aesthetics as political have reached design studies, understood as material cultural studies of designed objects as they circulate in society (for example, Lloyd, 1991; Julier, 2007; Boradkar, 2010). But they have not sufficiently reached the research of designing version of design studies, that is, interrogations of the design process as a practice of, what could be called, applied taste hermeneutics (though Harvey Molotch’s study of designers (2005) has an outsider’s recognition of the centrality of aesthetic judgement to the nevertheless function-oriented aims of designing — Molotch cites Bourdieu, but does not discuss practices).

Bourdieu is acknowledged as having initiated the current ‘practice turn’ in sociology (Schatzki et al., 2001). However, as Alan Warde, in the context of sociologies of consumption (2005), has pointed out, the link between taste regimes, as mapped by Bourdieu in *Distinction*, and practices, as I have just explained them, was not made clear by Bourdieu. Warde (2004) is forced to do some extrapolating to make sense of the formula in *Distinction*, “(habitus [capital]) + field = practice,” and finds it necessary to use Theodore Schatzki’s
characterizations of practices as more discrete ‘teleoaffектив structures.’ (2002) The work of practice-based sociologists such as Schatzki and Andreas Reckwitz is now being introduced into accounts of design (Shove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007; see also the activity-theory work of, for e.g., Gay & Hembrooke, 2004). From these emergent perspectives, the connection between Bourdieu’s work on taste regimes and designing becomes clearer. Being adept at discerning taste regimes also affords you access to what could be practice regimes – fields of know-how. Understanding the aesthetic judgments of someone provides insight into what he or she can do, or could be helped or persuaded to do.

I am therefore suggesting that there is an expertise to designing that involves reading people’s taste regimes for their ‘practice styles.’ A crucial part of designing is being sensitive to overlapping tastes, the habitus that enables those overlaps, and so the practice dispositions of people with such a habitus. Designers are concerned with style, because style is a translator of people’s structured choices into action propensities.

2.1 Innovative styles of practice
To explain, let me broaden the notion of ‘style.’ Style most immediately refers to a more or less rule-bound look. However, the term equally applies to actions, to the modes or moods with which activities are undertaken. Any practice is able to be performed in various ways; not just in distinct sequences, but with distinct paces and pressures and mindfulness. For Fernando Flores and his Heideggerian colleagues, Charles Spinosa and Hubert Dreyfus (1999), style is more like the ground of a practice, that which coordinates actions and makes them meaningfully part of a practice:

There is more to the organization of practices, however, than interrelated equipment, purposes and identities. All our pragmatic activity is organized by a style. Style is our name for the way all the practices ultimately fit together. A common misunderstanding is to see style as one aspect among many of either a human being or human activity, just as we may see the style as one aspect of many of a jacket. Our claim is precisely that a style is not an aspect of things, people or activity, but rather, constitutes them as what they are. (page 19)

The importance of this more ontological way of characterizing style becomes apparent exactly when Flores et al. describe encounters with new situations:

Sometimes finding a situation familiar means simply having an appropriate set of dispositions and having them respond on cue. No doubt people do form habits and find situations familiar, but there is another feature of familiarity that is different from, indeed, opposed to, this sort of habituation. One can find a situation familiar even when one has never
experienced its like before. In such a case what makes a set of practices feel familiar is that they share a style. (19)

Now this is an important point worth dwelling over. Flores et al. are writing in a book about entrepreneurship. They are attempting to articulate the difference between a politics or managing that either:

a) conserves present setups, perhaps with incremental innovation (or evolution)
b) proposes unfeasible disruptions to present conditions
c) generates significant innovations around which present situations can nevertheless realign

The difference b) and c) is like the difference between art and design. The latter is concerned with use; the new that it creates must be practicable. Getting at the essence of design then, as opposed to some more radical or abstract creativity, means explaining not just how the practice of designing manages to generate the new, but also how designing manages to generate the not-so-new-as-to-be-unimplementable, Loewy’s famous MAYA — Most Advanced Yet Acceptable (see also Nelson & Stolterman, 2003). For Flores et al., the key to understanding the designing of the usefully new concerns style; innovating, but still within a style:

When people change their practices in meaningful ways, they do so on the basis of the style they already have. Style acts as the basis on which practices are conserved and also the basis on which new practices are developed… (20)

People who are very sensitive to the style of some domain are particularly good at making such adjustments. In fact, it is this characteristic that allows us to see a mastery in what they do… [Expert sportspeople] show their mastery of the game when they win by doing something that we would not have expected could be the reasonable thing for them to do given what we have seen before; but when it works out, we see, in hindsight, that what they did was to respond to the new situation by staying within their style and doing something new that the style called for. (22)

The hypothesis that emerges then is that designers, as expert innovators, operate within discernments of style and their variability. This is what risks being ignored when design thinking avoids the primacy of the aesthetic in design.

3 Designing functionality through form

There is a sense in which what I am arguing sounds very pedestrian. The modern profession of design had its birth in the slogan that form follows function. On the one hand, this meant that the aesthetic manifestation of a design was (to be) determined by its function. Design aesthetics has therefore always been
read to some extent practically. On the other hand, this slogan was also a kind of minimalist anti-aesthetic, requiring the form of a designed artifact to be constrained by the assumed universal and necessitous function of the design. Being against ornamentation, this modernist form of designing represents the opposite of what is being argued here; that the forms that comprise the functional aesthetics of a designed artifact (what Lars Hallnas (2011) has recently called the “interaction design expression”) reflect the variable taste regimes of its targeted users. The slogan for what is being argued here is more like ‘functionality follows the form of the taste practices of the target market.’ To explain, I will elaborate by outlining 3 under-researched areas of design practice.

3.1 Brand afforded designing

There has been some engagement, within design literature, with consumer-oriented research on how the design of a product can attract a purchaser. But the end-point of such design aesthetics has been ownership, with use being a secondary quality, something purchasers have to learn how to do more or less on their own. This is evident in much of the work on extending product use life by enhancing product-owner attachment (e.g., Mugge, Schoormans, & Schifferstein, 2005). The latter risks leading to products that are kept museum-like in display cases, rather than products in everyday use (on this distinction between symbolic value as opposed to use value in relation to product use life, see Verbeek & Kockelkoren, 1998, and Ilmonen, 2004). Embarrassingly, ‘user-centered design’ is a relatively recent innovation (Redström, 2006).

The shift from a marketing-focused designing to user-centered designing was paralleled by the shift in branding from integrated visual identity to experience design. The project of the former was merely integrating marketing channels throughout the customer’s experience of discovering and purchasing the designed artifact. The latter, with its project of ‘end-to-end’ branding, pays equal if not greater attention to the nature of the user’s experience of the designed artifact. A brand’s value derives (or is co-created, according to Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) from the usability of its products and services or, more significantly, from their usefulness.

Now, branding is very clearly a proactive version of Bourdieusian analysis. Conventional branding attempts to use the homologies of taste regimes to associate products and environments with the same levels of cultural and social capital. Experience design, as the convergence of interaction design, service design and branding, reintroduces the practice dimension to this Bourdieusian process. Branding becomes an exercise explicitly in styling, in the full practice-oriented sense of Flores et al.
There has been very little analytical research, of the type done by the Design Thinking Research group, on branding-based design (though see McCormack, Cagan, & Vogel, 2004 for an example of style-as-constraint/branding-as-marketing). More work is needed following the lead being taken by Megan Strickfaden in relation to analyses of the role of cultural capital in designing (for example, 2004, 2010). That work should include an interrogation of the role of branding in what Alan Costall identifies as “Socializing Affordances” (1995). To what extent are affordances stylistic, or of the same field as certain taste regimes? What is called for is a move similar to that made in Krippendorf’s Semantic Turn (2006), where the term ‘meaning’ is used to refer to the nexus of taste signifiers and use affordances. Krippendorf uses the model of language, suggesting the articulate-ability of these integrative meanings, whereas the more culturally-situated, embodied-action perspective of Bourdieu is deliberately designed to foreground the tacitness of many of these actions, the extent to which they are habitual or structured rather than interpreted or even negotiated. (On the debate about how ‘deep’ or ‘articulatable’ are Bourdieu’s habitus, see the discussion in Flyvbjerg, 2001, which draws heavily on Hubert Dreyfus’ work.)

Validating these claims would entail introducing Bourdieusian profiles into usability testing. One would be seeking to correlate sets of users with similar symbolic capital with the immediacy of features on designs intended to work as affordances. One could hypothesize finding, as Lucy Suchman famously did (1987), that what usability engineers presume is a universally rational communication, is in fact highly situated within a particular ensemble of cultural capital and even taste regimes. Suchman insisted upon a more Schatzkian version of the bounded ecosystem that comprises a practice, but research should now be done on the impact of more Bourdieusian socio-economic variables.

### 3.2 Performing personas

A particular design tool that represents the convergence of branding and (user-centered) designing is the persona (Pruitt & Adlin, 2006). This fictitious individual, somewhat accreted from market research, is designed to represent the typical user, quite literally speaking for the user during the design process. The aim of the method is to extrapolate from this individual to scenarios of use. Yet a persona is precisely a Bourdieusian profile; it is an inspiration board of tastes and activities.

Alan Cooper who originated the practice of using personas in user-centered design research (2004) claimed that personas allowed designers to access user goals in design-motivating ways. Phil and Susan Turner have usefully drawn critical attention to personas recently (2011), arguing that their agency derives, often with politically constrictive results, from their function as ‘stereotypes.’ On this reading, personas are tools for ‘chunking,’ productively reductive types of shorthand.
But I would rather claim that personas are tools for pattern recognition. They disclose styles, understanding style precisely as the pivot between taste regimes and practices. Unless style plays this role, it is impossible to explain the effectiveness of personas, how they enable designers to move from an ‘is’ (a description of a target market situation) to an ‘ought’ (a design proposal for an improved situation). From a Bourdieusian perspective, personas do for designs what art direction does in relation to film characters; personas are demonstrations of an adept reading of practical traits from stylistic built environment decisions.

3.3 Reproducing modernist practices

One of the important reasons for reconsidering style in relation to design thinking is because of the extent to which style remains central and pervasive in design education, in both the exoteric and hidden curriculum. Design education is exemplarily Bourdieusian:

The studio system is essential for socializing students with a cultivated habitus… By saturating students with the objects of architectural culture; by presenting them with role models, living examples of embodied cultural capital (hence the insistence on the importance of having practicing architects as teachers); by displaying in all the slight ways of manner, dress and taste that one is becoming what one wishes to be, the student absorbs that cultural capital in the only possible way, by presenting to the studio master’s gaze their whole social being. (Stevens, 1995, page 117).

This suggests that design education is not just about learning to play the game within the design field, but, since it is so explicit a form of reproduction, becoming adept at discerning the games of other fields. Though this is exactly what needs to be evaluated: to what extent are designers capable of empathizing across taste regimes and classes of cultural capital (see for instance, Aspers’ work (2010) on global fashion supply chains)?

When Neumeier, as the exception in promotions of “design thinking”, devotes Part 2 of The Designful Company (2009) to “The Rebirth of Aesthetics,” it is a celebration of elegance. Neumeier usefully demonstrates that a concern for aesthetics manifests not just in designers pursuing pleasing artifacts, but also pleasing solutions; artifact-enabled practices that have unexpected simple styles. Neumeier recalls the oftquoted Buckminster Fuller: “If the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.” (73) However, parsimony, far from being a universal truth, is a very particular modernist aesthetic, whether in organizational design as Neumeier mentions (see also Guillen, 1997) or computer programming as David Gelernter discusses in Machine Beauty (1998). By way of perhaps extreme contrast, consider Francois Jullien’s work on Ancient Chinese aesthetics of Detour (2004) and Blandness (2007). When Donald Norman claims in the first chapter of Emotional Design (2005) that “Attractive Things work Better,” what design education taste regime is being reproduced? Is this
part of what Jan Michl has recently called “the modernist apartheid” of design education (2007)?

There are complex issues here concerning the extent to which globalization has involved the homogenization of the taste regimes of the consumer classes. But the implication is that “design thinking” has been blind to the functional role of aesthetic tastes in design because a form of modernism has been taken for granted as a near universal, at least in the institutions of design education around the world.

4 Concluding remarks
I have been arguing that the promotion of “design thinking” has been replicating a tendency in Design Thinking Research to downplay the primacy of aesthetics in designing. This risks concealing the way in which designing is the designing in, with and of styles; styles that make possible existing and new forms of social practices. Designing is a current economic force when it is most explicitly designing via practical styles, as evidenced by brand-driven and persona-based design. Concealing the practice-oriented nature of styles in design in turn risks restricting design to only those styles to which design education unreflectively seeks to naturalize us.

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Note
1. Disclosing New Worlds lists the authors with Spinosa first, Flores second, and Dreyfus third. I call out Flores in relation to the following précis of their argument, as the first section of the book which discusses entrepreneurship is based on Flores’ biography, and Flores has gone on to be more explicit about the role of style in business innovation (Flores, 2000).

References


