

# Design and Value: The Ethical Nature of Beautiful Design

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PANOS PARIS

**Abstract:** Design theory is increasingly acknowledging the ethical nature of Design. At the same time, philosophers are becoming increasingly aware of the aesthetic potential of Design, and of its distinctive claim to beauty. Yet Design theorists and philosophers alike have failed to note the connection between the ethical nature of Design and its beauty. In this article, I argue that beautiful design is fundamentally ethical in nature. To this end, I develop what I call an axiological conception of functional beauty, whereby beauty is linked to other values, I broaden the notion of functions relevant to design to accommodate the many possible affordances of Design objects, and I argue that beautiful design is design that manifests deep, ethical, concern: beautiful design is careful design. I suggest that this can take a number of forms, and seek to distill some of these through detailed discussion of several examples of beautiful design.

*Keywords:* beauty, design, ethics, care, value

## Introduction

Beauty has long been associated with design of some sort; design arguments for the existence of God were likely inspired by experiences of beauty in the world; while a view dating back at least to the Stoics, whereby everything is beautiful, was likewise premised upon design: everything has been designed by God, whose wisdom and benevolence could not but produce beautiful designs. Nowadays we are much less likely to be persuaded by such arguments: after all, much of the ugliness in the world appears to be the product of design, or at least intention (albeit not God's). Yet this tradition points to an important, if often neglected, aspect of beautiful design: its link to ethical value. It's precisely such a value-laden view of beautiful design that I defend in this essay.

The notion of design I'll concentrate on is the narrower, more substantive one that aligns with the way 'design' is most commonly used today (cf. Parsons 2015: 8). By contrast to the traditional sense of 'design', referring to artefacts or forms created intentionally<sup>1</sup> and blueprints for these (cf. Bell 1914; Fry 1920), the narrower sense refers to that subset of practices, along with their products, in fields like architecture, industrial or interior design, as well as the design of utilitarian products, accessories, software, or apps. By Design then (henceforth capitalised to distinguish it from the traditional sense) I mean those practices and products whose designs are made in studios, taught in Design schools or departments, and exhibited in Design museums or sections. I won't define Design here, but assume a good intuitive grasp of the kinds of things it comprises (for definitions, see Gal & Ventura 2024: ch. 1; Parsons 2015: ch. 1).

Now, as Design itself contains aspects of traditional design, insofar as it comprises intentionally created objects and their blueprints, it would seem that the considerations made in the opening paragraph are applicable to Design *mutatis mutandis*. Still, we should bear in mind that Design has developed its distinctive tradition and is thus guided by certain culturally specific principles and

norms, that may have been absent were some objects designed outwith its framework, but which we need to presuppose as context and constraint.<sup>2</sup>

Against this backdrop, I argue that beautiful Design has an ineliminably ethical dimension, in a broad sense of being linked to the humanly good. The reason for this is twofold: firstly, Design is a fundamentally ethical practice in being concerned with the creation of products by and for the use of humans; such products inevitably affect us in various ways, not least since they are ubiquitous, spanning the realms of, *inter alia*, architecture (buildings), transport (cars, trains, etc.), medicine (MRI scanners, defibrillators, etc.), communication technology (phones, smartphones, social media platforms, etc.), domesticity (cutlery, tableware, etc.). Secondly, partly because of this, functional beauty, under an axiological construal whereby it's understood as connected to other values, is the species of beauty most suitable to Design.

I begin by offering some background on the fraught relationship between form and function in Design, and the implications of this for Design aesthetics, including some prominent objections against the possibility of function-based aesthetics. Section 2 then outlines two recent accounts of design aesthetics, and argues that they fail to provide a fully satisfactory account of beautiful design. In section 3, I outline the ethical dimension of design, and argue that both philosophers and Design theorists have failed to see the link between the ethical nature of Design and its beauty. Section 4 introduces what I call the axiological theory of functional beauty, whereby beauty is linked to central values, allowing us to harmonise the ethics and aesthetics of Design. Section 5 discusses some examples of axiologically functionally beautiful Design and seeks to trace their beauty to the idea that their Design objects embody ethical care. Before concluding, I address an important objection by way of further strengthening my proposal.

## 1. Form, Function, & Problems for Design Aesthetics

### 1.1. Design: Form & Function

The notion of Design is closely tied to functional considerations, since design—the process—is always design *of* something and *for* some end(s), while the product of that process—the object—*embodies*, in this sense, such end(s).<sup>3</sup> Design objects are also used by people, serve users' interests, purposes, etc., whether or not these correspond to the objects' intended functions. Such functions are normally of a quotidian and/or utilitarian character.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Design objects, in being a subspecies of artefacts, viz., products of design in the broader sense mentioned earlier, possess form, at least in the traditional sense, where form comprises an object's elements and their interrelations (cf. Paris 2018; 2024a).

Yet Design objects' forms are taken to be more substantive, and it is helpful to distinguish Design from practices like engineering, where function seems paramount (cf. Forsey 2025; Parsons 2015: 20–24). This sense of form tends to be associated with the “surface” (Parsons *ibid.*),<sup>5</sup> or perceivable dimension of objects (Saito 2007:110–111), which in turn is taken as the basis of their aesthetic character. Now, while it's plausible that Design's uniqueness (aesthetically and otherwise) stems partly from its being distinct from, yet closely related to, both the fine arts, traditionally associated more closely with their formal dimension, and engineering, in turn usually thought of exclusively in terms of functionality, we should not overplay such contrasts; for, as we'll see below, we would risk misguiding our thinking about Design and obscuring important aspects of its beauty.

For now, let us simply say, uncontroversially I hope, that both form and function are indispensable components of Design (cf. Gal & Ventura 2024). In this sense, of course, Design turns out to be like much else, and might seem to call for a pretty straightforward form of appreciation: good Design is simply a matter of wellformedness for function, viz., enables the object to realise its function(s) well. To the extent that aesthetic appreciation is a matter partly of the direct experience or apprehension of an object's form, and aesthetic properties—especially those related to beauty—are

also plausibly related to form (even if sometimes indirectly, e.g., in beautiful expression), a similarly straightforward conception of Design beauty seems to suggest itself: beautiful Design at least partly consists in an object's directly apprehensible wellformedness for its function. This is indeed a highly promising starting point.

But before we say more on this, it's worth pausing at an irony: for it's precisely considerations like the functional nature of Design that have been cited as reasons against a distinctive kind of beauty in Design. While a detailed discussion of scepticism about Design aesthetics would be out of place here, I shall nonetheless outline some philosophical concerns related to the points mentioned in this section, since they throw into relief certain desiderata for a successful account of beautiful Design.

### 1.2. Scepticism About Design Aesthetics

Scepticism about beauty in Design is not indiscriminate; it'd be foolish to deny that Design objects can be beautiful in ordinary ways, in being elegant, monumental, etc. But, some think, Design cannot have aesthetic properties *qua* Design, if by this we understand aesthetic properties that depend on function(s). At least three arguments appear to support such scepticism.

Firstly, insofar as functions—which form an important part of Design objects' identity *qua* Design—are imperceptible, and their appreciation is, at least partly, intellectual, they cannot possess aesthetic properties. This argument is based on a principle, accepted by many contemporary aestheticians,<sup>6</sup> whereby aesthetic properties depend on sensory properties; hence, only if an object possesses properties perceptible through the senses (in fact, only the distal senses) can it possess aesthetic properties. Hence, Design objects' aesthetic properties are limited to their non-functional aspects.<sup>7</sup>

A related, second argument,<sup>8</sup> suggests that functional objects cannot possess aesthetic properties in virtue of their functionality. That's because, according to another firmly entrenched tenet in aesthetics, aesthetic judgements are disinterested, and distinctively unconcerned with practical matters. If so, then the question of whether an object is successful at performing some function, or indeed suitably fashioned to perform it, is irrelevant to its aesthetic value. But Design objects' performance *vis-à-vis* their functions would seemingly have to be factored into the aesthetics of Design *qua* Design. Hence, there cannot be such aesthetics.

A third argument against Design aesthetics takes issue with the concept of function itself. Objects perform all sorts of functions, and it's not clear which of these should factor into an aesthetic appreciation of Design, nor how or why they should do so. I use my chair as a clothes rack, decorative object, etc. Are all of these my chair's functions and relevant to appreciating its beauty? Are they a chair's functions more generally?<sup>9</sup> In the absence of clarity about this, there cannot be an aesthetics of Design, at least not one similar to art or nature aesthetics.

## 2. Towards an Aesthetics of Design: Dependent & Functional Beauty

Faced with such difficulties, one might abandon the quest for a theory of beautiful Design. Perhaps this explains why Design is at best a peripheral topic in aesthetics, despite its prevalence and extraordinary influence on our lives, behaviours, etc. Fortunately, this has begun to change recently. In this section, we look at two important recent accounts of the beauty of Design.

### 2.1. Dependent Beauty & Functional Style

Jane Forsey (2013; 2025) has developed an aesthetics of Design based on Kant's account of dependent beauty. According to Kant, beauty and its judgement are, at their purest, disinterested, in the sense of being independent of considerations and a concept concerning "what the object ought to be", which in turn rely on understanding the object's kind (cf. §1.2). But there is another kind of "merely [dependent] beauty [which] does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it" (2001: 114). For Kant, then, while some objects, like flowers,

delight us merely through their shapes, colours, etc.; others, like horses, delight us through their being excellent instances of a kind—so that appreciating their beauty requires knowing what a perfect instance of them would be like (or having a range of comparison cases against which we can assess a given instance).

Forsey extends Kant's account to Design, arguing that its beauty is a matter of our subjective response of pleasure to how well the object in question performs its function. Its function, for Forsey, is specified intentionally, i.e., is what the object was meant to do, as opposed to how it happens to be used (2025: p. 38). To appreciate this, in turn, we need to use the object (it's not just how it looks that matters) and to compare it to alternatives (not necessarily consciously). Forsey's wonderful example is her classic Bialetti Moka cafetière, which I too love using every morning and for which I have yet to find a superior alternative. Her contrast Design is the Vev Vigano Itaca Oro by Alessi. Although the latter may look better, it's less beautiful *qua* Design, because of features like its brass handle, which, unlike the Bakelite Bialetti handle, conducts heat and makes it difficult to handle when hot, a familiar problem with much careless kitchen-utensil Design.

In her latest work, Forsey explains that beautiful design is a matter of 'functional style'. This, in turn, depends on the object's being a product of choices that concern how the object will look *vis-à-vis* its function, provided it's good at realising the latter. For, she clarifies, objects like hammers that are not designed with a concern for their appearance—or do not use “ornamentation in the play of form within functional constraints” (2025: p.42)—are not beautiful.

## 2.2. Functional Beauty

A second contemporary account is Parsons & Carlson (2008)'s theory of functional beauty. In a nutshell, functional beauty consists in an object's looking fit for its function(s).

Parsons & Carlson substantiate their theory with analyses of its central components. Specifically, they argue, the functions that matter aesthetically are objects' proper functions, viz., those belonging to the object, as opposed to ones being incidentally imposed on it by users. Another way of bringing out the intuitive contrast between proper and other functions is to speak of the difference between an object's *having a function* F and its *functioning as* F. Parsons & Carlson offer a theory of such proper functions, whereby artefacts' proper functions are those that have contributed to the reproduction of that artefact type because of its ancestors' meeting some need or want in the marketplace in virtue of their performing function, F, which in turn led to the manufacture and distribution of such artefacts (cf. Parsons 2015). Additionally, Parsons & Carlson borrow Walton's (1970) influential framework in order to show how such functions can be made aesthetically perceptible and affect an object's aesthetic value.

These resources allow Parsons & Carlson not only to get around the issues discussed in §1.2 above, but also offer a substantive account of functional beauty, detailing different subspecies of it (cf. Parsons 2015: 118–120), and making their account especially nuanced and widely applicable.

## 2.3. Problems with Current Theories

Both Forsey's and Parsons & Carlson's accounts have, I think, made enormous progress in philosophically substantiating a Design aesthetics. Moreover, they offer aestheticians interested in Design invaluable theoretical resources. Still, I don't think that they are entirely successful, and in this subsection, I discuss certain shortcomings that I think are important and common to both accounts. This will also help us see what's required of a satisfactory theory of beautiful Design.

The first problem is that both accounts—even while going beyond the immediately perceptible or visible qualities of objects—ultimately rest their theories on what I would call a superficial, sensory level. Parsons & Carlson's account focuses on looking fit and clearly distinguishes this appearance from an object's actual performance or its potential for actual performance *vis-à-vis* its function. Forsey takes more heed of how well an object is adapted to realise its function, and requires using

the object, spending time with it, etc., before one can fully appreciate its beauty. This, she explains, is because to be genuinely a matter of Design beauty has to depend on how well the object performs its intended function. Yet, given her (2013) insistence to maintain the distinction between the beautiful and the good, as well as her more recent elaboration of this view through her notion of functional style (2025), she ultimately seems committed to holding that such beauty does not wholly emerge from the object's being well formed for its function; instead, it is constrained by, or dependent on such wellformedness for function, its proper source being how the object looks given these functional constraints.

Such a sensory focus is problematic both because Design functions are largely intelligibly appreciable features of an object, but also because some Design is purely conceptual or abstract—like software Design, or even the Design of digital platforms, where fitness for function stems not so much from any sensory appearance, but from how they are structured to guide attention towards various places, and make the whole experience smoothly navigable. In this sense, much Design is strikingly similar to abstract objects like mathematical proofs or scientific theories, which likewise have properties like beauty, partly in virtue of their fitness for function (cf. Paris 2020), but whose beauty is not in the slightest related to how they look or to any perceptual feature they may contingently have in their visible manifestations (e.g., when written down). Perhaps the reason that Parsons & Carlson and Forsey restrict their accounts to the sensory features of things is to eschew the difficulties we discussed earlier in §1.2. Specifically, focusing on sensory features shows how, on the one hand, Design beauty respects the dependence of aesthetic properties upon sensory ones; while, on the other, it does not wholly depend on goal-directedness, thereby respecting so-called 'disinterestedness'.

Yet if those who have argued for mathematical beauty, beauty in games like football and chess, or moral beauty, are at all to be trusted, we need not worry about these objections, which seem more like philosophical prejudices than genuine constraints on aesthetic reality, as it were (cf. Paris 2024a; 2018; 2020).

A second problem is that both accounts use 'beauty' in a broad sense. In other words, they are more interested in aesthetic value in general, which includes many properties besides beauty, like the sublime, tragic, monumental, or funny, than the more narrow and everyday sense of beauty. While perhaps philosophically more elusive, this latter sense of beauty plausibly refers to a specific kind of value, or property, the mark of which, for lack of a more widely agreed upon feature, is its capacity to elicit pleasure in its appreciator (cf. Scruton 2009; Levinson 2011). While Parsons & Carlson and Forsey occasionally mention pleasure, they are quite explicit that it's the broader sense of beauty that they have in mind. This will also become apparent in §2.4 below, where we shall see how their accounts have the implication that many objects count as beautiful that are far from pleasing or beautiful in the narrower sense.

Before I argue for this last point, I should mention a third, related problem with available accounts of Design beauty. This is that, for all their insistence on incorporating function into an account of Design aesthetics, they actually end up losing sight of the object's functions themselves as opposed to merely the way in which the object is construed to realise them. To put it differently: they look at the instrumental relation between form and function, rather than the more intrinsic one, which requires seeing the embodiment of the function in the form. This, I think, prevents Forsey's and Parsons & Carlson's accounts from being genuinely sensitive to Design as not just a discipline and practice that combines form and function, but as one that is deeply embedded in a sociocultural framework of beliefs, desires, interests, customs, and so on. Even Gal and Ventura, otherwise admirably pluralistic and sensitive to the polymorphousness of design, refer to design as a "discipline combining function and aesthetics" (2024: 120), thereby driving a wedge between these two dimensions. Such a way of thinking is understandable, given the radical narrowing that our concept of the 'aesthetic' has undergone since the nineteenth century and how far it's moved



from its etymological and conceptual predecessors in the Greek *aesthesis* (from which ‘aesthetics’ is derived, and which, contrary to popular translations, denotes feeling, not just sense perception) and *kalon* (which was the standard ancient Greek term for ‘beautiful’).<sup>10</sup> But this does not mean that it is correct. On the contrary, I feel that it fails to do complete justice to the aesthetics of Design, which, due to the *nature* of Design, should integrate function fully. This is a shame not just for Design theory, but also because, given the affinity between Design and the broader field of purposive or teleological fashioning, such a theory would shed considerable light on the aesthetics of much else besides Design.

Now, this centrality of function for Design and so for an account of its beauty *qua* Design, notwithstanding the importance of form, is a central assumption in my argument below, and one that seems particularly pertinent if we take seriously certain claims made both by Forsey (2013; 2025) and Parsons (2015: chapter 1). Specifically, on the one hand, that in Design and its appreciation we should not lose sight of the importance of users’ perspectives and how a given Design affects them. On the other hand, Designers, by contrast to builders or craftspersons, are primarily planners and overseers. For, if so, then Design appreciation should concern itself neither with superficial form nor with fitness for function in isolation, but with an intimate appraisal of the form–function complex. This, in turn, suggests that the appreciation of Design *qua* Design—perhaps more so than that of art or craft (though I do not wish to commit to this claim)—should more fully encompass considerations of what the object’s function *is*.

This should have been obvious all along, since it’s impossible to assess an object’s fitness for its function without somehow apprehending or experiencing its function in its form. But perhaps what’s less obvious is that, given our psychology, what an object’s function is will factor into our response of pleasure or displeasure in apprehending an object no less than will its form. This is perhaps best seen through a brief exploration of indifferent and ugly design, which shall also help substantiate the concerns with available accounts of the aesthetics of Design we’ve just looked at.

#### 2.4. Indifferent & Ugly Design

Let’s begin with an example from Forsey (2025). She observes that beautiful Design is more than an object’s being fit for its function, offering a plain hammer as an example of something fit for its function that cannot thereby be beautiful. But why, one might ask, isn’t the hammer beautiful, since if heavy, rigid, and easy to handle, it’s perfectly fit for its function? Is it really because it does not have what she calls functional style, so that it’s not especially visually conspicuous? This is far from clear to me. Consider the defibrillator, another perfectly plain piece of contemporary Design; or consider blood pressure and oxygen monitors. I submit that, provided that we open-mindedly contemplate their literally life-saving Design sophistication, they should not strike us as aesthetically indifferent. On the contrary, it is plausibly their very visual plainness, which throws their functions into relief, that makes them beautiful. This suggests that if certain Design objects are aesthetically indifferent, this cannot be simply in virtue of their sensory appearance; instead, they are indifferent at least partly in virtue of their function, which is *embodied* in their form.<sup>11</sup>

Some examples of ugly Design will, I think, shed some more light on this suggestion. Assuming that ugliness is the contrary of beauty (cf. Paris 2017), they may also give us some idea of where to look for beautiful Design.

Now, Design ugliness can come from an obvious source, if accounts like the above are on the right track. Deformity, in the sense of poor form for an object’s function, is at least a *prima facie* basis of ugly Design (cf. *ibid.*). Here, however, I’m more interested in cases where a Design may be ugly but not straightforwardly deformed.

Consider a standard thought experiment in aesthetics involving an experiential shift (cf., Eaton 1999; Paris 2018). Suppose that we’re walking around town and, passing under a bridge, you remark upon how nice those thorny concrete patterns are on the side of the pavement, nicely

breaking up the uniformity of tarmac and concrete of the built-up city's tapestry, lending it a stellar quality. 'Beautiful Design', you say. But then I explain that their function is not to titillate walkers' visual interest, but to prevent the homeless from finding shelter from the elements and sleeping there, and that they're known as 'homeless spikes', and form part of a broader 'tradition' of 'defence architecture'. As far as 'functional style' and 'looking fit' go, 'defence architecture' does rather well: both visually intriguing and fit for its functions. Yet, precisely because of their good design, even though a moment ago you found them beautiful, you now find them ugly and are disgusted by them (at least, if we're walking together, I hope you do). Are we eccentric in this respect? Perhaps, but if so, then so is a Guardian columnist who has had experience of sleeping rough, and who wrote of such Design that it makes "life ... uglier for all of us" (Andreou 2015).

*(a) Insensitive or Cruel Design*

This, I believe, is an example of cruel or insensitive Design, viz., manifesting a blatant cruelty and disrespect towards members of the community and, precisely because it's so carefully thought out to realise its function, it is, I submit, strikingly ugly. Examples of insensitive Design abound and can contribute to highly discriminatory tendencies through manifesting racist, sexist, or ableist traits,<sup>12</sup> but, on the whole, it comprises objects whose Design manifests an indifference towards people's diversity of traits, needs, and circumstances, which can range from insensitive to dehumanising. Such design can be ugly even if it is visually rather intriguing or playful. For instance, in one my institution's newest lecture theatres, the side walls are decorated by a series of thin wooden panels, resembling an op-art piece, prominent enough to disorient even neurotypical individuals, let alone individuals who are neurodivergent, epileptic, or suffer from eye conditions, migraines, etc.<sup>13</sup> This brief description alone hopefully illustrates the insensitivity of such Design.

*(b) Manipulative Design*

A variant of such cruel Design is manipulative Design. This ranges from features in the Design of products like smartphones that make them addictive, e.g., using red for notifications, etc.; to the graphic Design in advertising. These typically seek to forge sub-personal associations between a product and highly desirable things like happiness, love, sex, etc., where such associations are arbitrary and contingent at best, dangerously misleading at worst (to put it bluntly: regularly eating at McDonalds will make you neither healthy nor happy).<sup>14</sup>

*(c) Irresponsible, Complacent, & Arrogant Design*

Design's ability to function not just for obvious utilitarian purposes, but also in expressive, symbolic, or, indeed, identity-forming ways points to another source of ugliness.<sup>15</sup> This stems from Design that serves to either self-aggrandise or signal inappropriate traits. For instance, the instantly recognisable Louis Vuitton handbag<sup>16</sup> or Balenciaga sock-shoe inevitably draw attention to their price tag, signalling the owner's wealth and social standing. In some cases of hyper-minimal, or even visually ugly design, one's social standing is signalled either by one's being in fashion, or possessing refined sensibilities that enable them to see the value in the apparent disvalue, in a tune of self-aggrandisement that chimes with that found in some forms of appreciative practices in the contemporary artworld.

Irresponsible Design also occurs with respect to the natural world. The UK has an atrocious record of environmentally unsustainable and ecologically harmful building work (Fuller 2022; Davis 2020) with many large developments and regeneration projects being ecologically myopic at best, environmentally disastrous at worst. An example is the recent 'regeneration' of Cardiff's Central Station square, which has been covered in concrete and has had high-rise buildings erected around it, greeting the visitor with what can only be described as a bleak view of the city, and a couple of trees ticking the 'green-regeneration' box seen in the vicinity. This is all the more outrageous given that Cardiff's most valuable assets are its green spaces.

But there are also genuinely dangerous examples of inappropriate Design. For instance, consider lethally fast and large automobiles, or car Designs exuding airs of aggression or self-assurance, when what's needed on our roads is safety, humility, and discretion. Or think about 'beauty apps' that prescribe standards against which users assess themselves, targeted to women, including young girls, with devastating effects on their self-esteem (cf. Paris 2022b).

If I'm right that such examples of Design can be called ugly upon understanding their function(s), then they seem to gesture towards something important that alternative accounts lack: a normative dimension inherent in the functional nature of Design that should feature centrally in a theory of its beauty.<sup>17</sup> Such normativity concerns not just fitness for function. On the contrary, the examples I've given above perform their functions perfectly well—sometimes too well. But they seem all the more ugly for that. Why is this? I submit that it's because Design is a highly ethically charged practice, its products being woven deeply into the fabric of our social, cultural, political, and ideological tapestries. Let us take a closer look at this aspect of Design before, finally, offering a theory of Design beauty that's fit for purpose.

### 3. The Ethical Nature of Design

Although largely neglected by moral philosophers, Design theorists are vocal about the power of Design over us, some going so far as to claim that it "controls our whole life – our whole happiness depends upon it" (Grillo 1960: 15; quoted in Parsons 2015: 27). While perhaps an overstatement, anyone who thinks that it's a gross one should think again. Just consider how smartphones, laptops, or social media have changed the way we behave, but also how they've shaped how we think about ourselves, consequently affecting our mental health and shaping our visual, tactile, conversational, gustatory, and social ways of navigating the world (cf. Paris 2022b).

It's clear that design has ethical dimensions. Crudely put, products of Design are products of human purposeful activity, intended to perform some function, or realise some end that, presumably, meets some people's needs, satisfies their desires, or realises their ends. Indeed, on some occasions, those desires, needs, and interests are themselves products of Design, something that former Apple CEO, Steve Jobs, knew well (cf. Gal & Ventura 2024: 150). Insofar as actions, intentions and interests are all amenable to ethical evaluation, Design, too, is subject to such evaluation, perhaps more clearly so than art.

Unsurprisingly, then, several Design theorists have emphasised the ethical aspects of Design. For instance, Papanek (1971) emphasises the moral responsibilities of designers, on the grounds that they populate our world with objects, many of which shape our attitudes, thinking, and even desires and needs, while some—like cars—have the potential to become either safe transporters, or lethal weapons, never mind their social-signalling implications, and their associations with certain ethically questionable norms (like masculinity, power, etc.; see also §2.4.3 above).

Others such as Fry through his notion of 'defuturing' (2020), go even further. Design, Fry argues, contributes to destroying our world and the prospects of a future, or at least one worth living in—this is what his notion of 'defuturing' refers to. This is partly because Designers conceive of their discipline as concerned with spatial, material production. Instead, Fry suggests, Designers should reconceive theirs as a temporal discipline, shifting their work towards 'futuring' (2009), viz., safeguarding a worthwhile future. Though this may sound odd, Fry's point is that good Design should face up to its potential to shape our future, either by destroying or preserving and enhancing it—a Design project that he calls 'redirective' (2020: 47). According to Fry, then, Design ought to take seriously its political and civic aspects, become mindful of contemporary concerns, and create forward-looking and sustainable products (cf. Gal & Ventura 2024: 42–45).

Such theories are commendable for highlighting the ethical import of Design and alerting Designers to it. After all, failure to notice the ethical side of Design is itself an ethical flaw and a symptom of our contemporary tendency, especially prevalent in academic thinking, to over-



compartmentalise and over-specialise. But Design should be resistant to these ideologies, given its hybridity and its embeddedness in culture, with the diverse ethical, social, political, ideological, and other dimensions that this entails, all of which should be reflected in its understanding and appreciation.

Even Design theorists like Fry and Papanek, however, tend to see the ethical nature of Design as distinct from its beauty. Hence, they have faced resistance from theorists who adopt more descriptive, formalist views of Design, for failing to take the importance of aesthetics into account (Gal & Ventura 2024: 45–56).

Conversely, as we've already seen, the best philosophical discussions of Design aesthetics appear to be strikingly amoral. This is not because philosophers are unaware of moral or indeed practical or other issues with design, but because they, too, think of these as properly distinct from aesthetic considerations (cf. Parsons & Carlson 2008: 150–155; Forsey 2013: 195).

One explanation for such omissions may be the apparent absence of a suitable theory of beauty.<sup>18</sup> Yet I do think that there is such a theory, consisting, as it happens, in a particular construal of the theory of functional beauty discussed earlier.

#### 4. Axiological Functional Beauty, Design, and Ethical Value

We have already seen that recent accounts of beautiful Design aren't really about beauty *per se*, but aesthetic value in general.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, they fail to fully appreciate Design's fundamental interplay between form and function. This, we saw, is largely because they ignore *what* the object's function is, except insofar as it informs *how* an object's form is shaped to realise it (or appear to realise it). Taking the object's function truly into account inevitably leads us down an ethical route, one that's been tread by several Design theorists. Such theorists have, however, in turn failed to appreciate the link between Design's ethical nature and its beauty.

In this section, I offer an alternative account of beautiful Design that does justice not just to the ineliminably functional nature of design, but its ethical nature also. Specifically, I adapt an alternative account of functional beauty that I recently developed elsewhere (Paris 2020), and which is designed to do three things.<sup>20</sup> First, to be immune to the numerous counterexamples facing theories like Forsey's and Parsons & Carlson's that stem from their failure to take seriously Design objects' functions (see §2.4). Second, to avoid the tendency—rife in aesthetics since the nineteenth century and only recently challenged (by, *inter alia*, Paris 2018; 2024a; Doran 2021; Stecker 2019)—to associate the aesthetic exclusively with the distally perceptible (see §1.2). And, third, to serve as an account of beauty proper, which I take to consist, at least partly, in pleasing form (see §2.3; cf. Paris 2024b).

On my account of functional beauty an object is functionally beautiful when it is well-formed for its function and its wellformedness also pleases most suitably qualified appreciators when experienced either perceptually or intellectually (i.e., in contemplation) (Paris 2020: 521).

This is an unabashedly hybrid account, comprising formal, functional, and subjective conditions. Yet it thereby correctly predicts that the kinds of objects that I earlier suggested were indifferent or even ugly despite being well-formed for their function will not be beautiful. That's because, plausibly, they will fail to please suitably qualified appreciators.

This, of course, raises several questions, including: what does wellformedness for function consist in on this account? Moreover, the account appears to contain a major loophole: its second condition stipulates that the wellformedness in question must be pleasing. But why is this?

##### 4.1. Axiological Functional Beauty & Pleasure

Firstly, I note that the gap between wellformedness and pleasure is not just hedging: the combination of the two conditions does theoretical work by specifying what the intentional object of the pleasure is. Furthermore, in showing that it's objects' form,<sup>21</sup> it arguably shows that it's *bona fide*

aesthetic. But, based on the arguments made so far, I think that we can, at least tentatively, say something more substantive. I suggest that what determines, or at least partly explains, pleasure in Design objects meeting the wellformedness condition in my version of functional beauty is the value of their function and the way in which they realise it. This explains why torture instruments, for instance, remarkably well-formed for their functions though they may be, are more likely to displease, even if they are visually exquisite. It also explains why something as visually simple as a defibrillator or oximeter may strike one as beautiful.<sup>22</sup> In this way, this version of functional beauty is the species of beauty that is conversant with other values *par excellence*. So let's call it the *Axiological* theory of Functional Beauty, or AFB, for short.

#### 4.2.1. AFB & Functions

Identifying the relevant kind of function in the aesthetic appreciation of Design is among the thorniest tasks. We've already seen two different takes in Forsey's intentionalist and Parsons & Carlson's evolutionary accounts. What's common between these is that they see only one kind of function as aesthetically relevant to Design (what Parsons & Carlson call 'proper' function).

AFB was originally also couched in terms of proper functions, though more pluralistically assuming that some combination of intentions and evolutionary considerations would specify artefacts' aesthetically relevant function(s) (2020: 521). However, it now seems to me that Design theory reveals that restricting Design objects' aesthetically relevant functions to their 'proper functions' is inadequate. For such artefacts can be multifunctional in unanticipated ways, and it's plausible that their functions evolve in response to users' employment of them, as well as in light of what Gal (2022) calls their 'affordances', namely functions or uses that they promise to, or are capable of realising, regardless of whether they or their ancestors did or were intended to do so. This is not to say that any use an object is subjected to should be seen as a function belonging to the object or as being aesthetically relevant. But it does cast doubt on the prospects of devising a theory that readily identifies a Design object's aesthetically relevant functions.

In lieu of a theory, I suggest that we see objects' relevant functions as open-ended and specified by a number of different considerations, including what keeps certain objects in the marketplace, what designers intended, as well as what use people are consistently making of the items, and what functions an imaginative, responsible, and expert appreciator can distil from the object. This is a pluralist view that leaves much to the interpretation and exploratory use of objects.

Now, upon specifying an object's *bona fide* function(s), which I assume can be done, though perhaps on a case-by-case basis, wellformedness can be straightforwardly relativised and assessed in light of each of an object's functions both individually and jointly. This sounds easy in theory but will, no doubt, be a delicate, complicated, and in most cases ongoing affair in practice. Yet this is no objection to the account. On the contrary, it's the price we pay for acknowledging and respecting the richness and diversity of Design objects, as well as their embeddedness in our multidimensional lives—comprising *inter alia* social, political, ethical, epistemic, sensory, emotional, imaginative, and, of course, practical aspects. This price, moreover, I submit, is worth paying, not least as it's compensated for by our account's potential to illuminate the nature of Design beauty and its appreciation, as I'll shortly argue.

#### 4.2.2. Hierarchies of Function & the Evolution of Design

The intuition behind philosophers' insistence on proper functions is, I think, that it's obvious that many, if not most, functional kinds—desks, chairs, tables, lamps, houses, public buildings, computers, cinemas, mugs, glasses, medical devices—have certain functions that are central to them; so central, in fact, that they lend them their identity. It is reasonable to think that these should also play a central role in their appreciation. Notwithstanding this, many of these items have been made for a long time, over the course of which their designs' functionality has (apparently at least) reached its peak.

It's difficult to imagine improving on the best pint glasses that we've already got; we know how to make pint glasses that need no improvement in their Design when it comes to realising their function. This allows us to experiment with other dimensions of theirs, including introducing expressive or novel elements in their Design. After all, their function isn't all that important—sure, it's nice to drink beer, but there are more important things in life.

Jokes aside, this reveals an important point: objects can realise more than one proper function and can also have other functions besides their proper ones. Some functions may also be more important or valuable than others. It's even possible that some non-proper functions are more important than proper ones (cf. Gal & Ventura 2024: 131–132, 137).

This is especially plausible once we think that the evolution of a functional Design-type has reached a zenith.<sup>23</sup> For instance, an opera house should, in the first instance, work well to accommodate the audience, house an orchestra, provide space for rehearsals, tailor its acoustics to operatic standards, etc.<sup>24</sup> But, increasingly, opera houses perform other functions too, including bringing the community together, being welcoming to diverse and variously abled people, etc. Even though the latter don't seem like an opera house's proper functions, this does not diminish their importance, which in some cases may even be more important than the building's primary function(s). This is particularly so at a time when our cities look like concrete billboards, and are thereby becoming increasingly alienated and decreasingly hospitable to civic values.

It may help here to introduce some terminology to help us keep track of things. Let's call an object's most central proper function(s) primary function(s). In addition to these, there may be further, secondary, i.e., less central, proper functions. But there can also be primary, secondary, tertiary, etc., non-proper functions; let's borrow the term 'affordances' to refer to such functions so as not to mix them up with proper functions. Each of these functions and affordances may be more or less ethically valuable.

What I'd like to suggest is that, given our construal of AFB, in appreciating Design, we often need to balance a rich network of axiological dimensions that may involve complex interplays. At the very least, we need to assess both an object's wellformedness for its primary functions and the significance and value of these. But often, there will be more. For instance, there may be secondary and tertiary proper functions and their respective degree of wellformedness and value to add to the equation. And there may further be primary, secondary, tertiary, etc., affordances (that may not be proper functions but that can plausibly be said to be functions belonging to the object nonetheless) whose wellformedness and importance needs to be factored into our judgement and appreciation. The final equation, of course, will comprise the totality of these alongside any interplays between them.

Now, on this picture, I think that AFB predicts that some objects will turn out to be beautiful simply in virtue of their wellformedness for their primary function. The hammer could be one of these, but even more so the defibrillator and portable blood pressure monitor, whose wellformedness for their primary proper function is pleasing insofar as that function is so important and valuable to us. Likewise, given the presence of 'defence architecture' that we encountered in §2.4.1, and which encompasses objects like wavy benches or benches with dividers, that serve a secondary proper function that we find insensitive, we might also come to find that the humble, ordinary bench, nowadays sometimes labelled 'welcome bench', which arguably just serves one proper function (allowing people to sit together), is actually more beautiful in virtue of realising a secondary function, of which we may have been unaware: offering those who need it a spot to lie down.

Other objects, however, like a lemon juicer or a jug, especially today, given the many highly functional alternatives available, may need to do more to be noticeably beautiful. Gal & Ventura (2024) mention the Juicy Salif lemon juicer's functioning as a conversation starter. Now, on my account, this isn't an example of beautiful Design, not least because it's poorly formed for its primary function. But it's also not beautiful because, while performing well its conversation-starter function, it's also a vanity signal (like some of the examples we discussed in §2.4.3) partly because of

the way its primary proper function is undermined by its secondary one. By contrast, however, the humbler, yet iconic, gluggle jug, performs its primary function just fine (indeed much better than one might expect looking at it), but is additionally, like the juicer, also a conversation starter, and a joyful one at that, not least because of its gurgling sound when pouring. It also invites its users to engage in what Gal (2022) calls visual metaphors, viz., visual-conceptual associations formed through imaginative play. The reason this is beautiful while the lemon juicer is not is, I think, the latter's deformity for its primary proper function, and the way it gives rise to a manifestation of vanity when combined with its secondary function are disvalues. By contrast, the invitation to visual metaphor and the joyful, simple, yet imaginative, way in which the gluggle jug serves as a conversation starter, is a valuable way of performing an important function, namely convivial socialising, whilst harmonising with its primary proper function.<sup>25</sup>

This last set of examples reveals yet another feature of my account, namely that it treats the distinction between form and function as inextricably porous. For the aspects of the gluggle jug discussed above are ones that alternative accounts, like Forsey's or Parsons & Carlson's, would probably treat as formal. However, on my account, they are part of the object's wellformedness-for-function; in other words, they are both formal and functional.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. The Ethical Nature of *Beautiful Design*

We now have the resources to accommodate the ethical nature of beautiful Design within a plausible philosophical account of a species of beauty—in other words, to see that aesthetics and ethics, formalism and functionalism, beautiful and ethical Design, are not in conflict: axiological functional beauty brings them together. The ethical features of design are easily seen as part of its functions, whether these are traceable to qualities that we would normally designate as formal—like the playful, expansive, richly associative character of some Designs, like the gluggle jug, which serves as a non-self-aggrandising dinner conversation starter; or the economy and simplicity of some designs, like a Mac computer's hardware and operating system, that makes them remarkably accessible;<sup>27</sup> or whether they stem from more obviously utilitarian qualities, like those of the defibrillator and 'welcome bench'.

Below, I discuss some examples, mining them for insights on the varieties of beautiful Design, and attempting to trace them to more fundamental aesthetic Design principle(s). I begin with a detailed case study that encompasses multiple aspects of beautiful Design.

### 5.1. *The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre, Athens, Greece: A Case Study in Beautiful Design*

I write this in a reading room of The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre (SNFCC), designed by Renzo Piano and his team, surrounded and often distracted by nervous pupils revising, university students completing coursework, and fellow researchers, all of us reading, writing, looking out the window. Curious members of the public wander in to sneak a peek. Out the window, a stretch of space with a water canal flanked by the homes of the Greek National Library's collection, to my left, and National Opera, to my right. Around it, children play, couples frolic, groups have work meetings, and friends hang out. Further afield, among other native plants, olive trees, cypresses, pines, rosemary, and lavender adorn the grounds and adjoining park, which extends over our heads. The structure that houses all of this is made mostly of solid concrete in simple horizontal, upright, and diagonal lines. It rises to a moderate height, yet enough to provide panoramic views of both the sea on one side, and the Acropolis on the other—two features that lend Athens part of its distinctive flair. Strictly speaking, it's not the building that rises, as it's built underneath an artificial slope which features the aforementioned park, and atop which stands a massive canopy that shelters a roof-terrace. The façade, out of which I'm gazing, stretches along the canal and largely comprises of large glass panels that illuminate the space, whilst allowing those outside to see inside.

This two-way openness and transparency lend the SNFCC a sense of community and sociality, making potential visitors feel welcome to enter and explore the site. And that's precisely how the SNFCC was greeted by Athenians and tourists from all walks of life, cultures and subcultures—old, young, variously-abled, metalheads, skaters, runners, students, businesspersons, opera-lovers—who immediately flocked to spend their time there, making the SNFCC one of the Greek capital's best loved sites.

At the same time, the fact that the building itself, and the cultural venues that it houses, stand underneath the park, which extends along the sloping roof, seems highly suggestive. In my view, it expresses a harmony and delicate balance between the values of nature and those of the arts and sciences, such that the collapse of the latter—of what we may call humanitarian values—spell the collapse of the former. Likewise, the views it provides of the Acropolis, on the one side, and the sea, on the other, seem premised upon that delicate balance, as though it's only by traversing through these values that one can look upon the city and see it clearly.

The physical qualities in the SNFCC's Design are similarly expressive. The overall impression one gets from a building like this is of a mix of solidity and transparency. The building is imposing, yet inviting, multifaceted and at an angle, yet accessible and digestible. It is both heavily grounded, but also rises with an air of lightness. What these wonderfully balanced pairs of contrasts suggest, at a further level of interpretation, is that entering the world of arts and letters, and espousing humanitarian and environmental values, presupposes a foundation that takes time, effort, and solid materials—both literally and metaphorically—to build and appreciate.

All of this is available to the reflective appreciator through a perceptual encounter with the building. But the most cursory research rewards further curiosity, adding a layer of imperceptible beauty to what can be glimpsed from a reflective tour of the site. For instance, we find that the slope was premised on a number of ideas. It was inspired by a place-name: Kallithea, or 'beautiful view'. That's the area where the SNFCC was built, which in antiquity offered a view of Athens' first port of Phaleron. Yet this flat and densely built area, cut off from the sea by a large highway, had not offered such views in decades. Piano sought to rectify this and, in doing so, exploit the city's two major resources—water and solar energy: the canal draws water in from the sea and the sloping roof collects rainwater, creating reservoirs of useable water, while the structure is crowned with a 'green roof' featuring 5,600 solar panels powering the building.

The large space where people gather around the canal was similarly inspired by historical associations, designed to function on the model of the ancient *agora*, the civic centre of town in ancient Athens, where citizens came together to socialise, but also shop, address civic matters, etc. Similarly, the SNFCC's agora provides "a true point of convergence, bustling with people, a perfect meeting and conversation spot where the ideals of Art and Beauty are revived" (SNFCC website; cf. Gal & Ventura 2024: 147–149). While unlikely to turn everyone into a bibliophile or opera enthusiast, it sends the message that the arts and letters are central to the city's identity, and they are proximate, familiar, and accessible.

Importantly, all of the above are not just superficial Design gestures. Athens is a city prone to earthquakes, and great care was taken to ensure the building's resilience to these natural phenomena, through a highly sophisticated seismic isolation model, which testifies not just to the designers' concern for the visitors to the site, but also the value attached to what the building encases: the world of Greek arts and letters (Giarelis et al. 2018). Likewise, the opera's design was thoughtfully conceived with a view to both the history of Greek opera and the latest science of acoustics (Bassuet 2012). Making the building sustainable was yet another major concern, as evinced through the aforementioned sloping roof-terrace and green canopy that harvest reusable water and solar power (Makowska 2021), as well as the overall space given to nature—Athens being a city desperately lacking in parks.



In sum, the SNFCC's Design embodies deep concern for certain values—art, knowledge and nature, as well as the life of a community through which the foregoing flourish or perish—along with the desire to nourish, showcase, and share them. This is not just superficially expressed in its visual appearance; it can be felt through its use, and established through examining its inner structure: that's precisely where its beauty inheres.

## 5.2. *Beautiful Design: Its Varieties & Source(s)*

### (a) *Ecological & Value-Based Design*

One of the SNFCC's important functions is adding ecological value to the city, which is partly where its Design beauty lies. As we've seen, it's not through the presence of features that merely appear ecologically-minded that the SNFCC is beautiful, but through their orchestration towards performing their respective ecological functions. For it's perfectly possible to appear sustainable but fail to be so: much contemporary housing built by corporate developers in the UK does precisely this (cf. §2.4.3). An exception to such hypocritical Design, and a clear example of ecological Design beauty is the Greener Grangetown project in Cardiff, designed by Arup. This is a sustainable urban drainage project that makes use of natural resources, including the nearby river Taff and newly-planted robust native trees and rain gardens that naturally purify most rain water before redirecting it to the river. This replaces a system where water travelled eight kilometres through a costly sewage system to be treated, before finally being discharged into the sea. It is, I think, evident how this Design is well-formed for its ecological function and, I submit, all the more beautiful for that.

Such Design not only shows care and concern for the environment, but also civic responsibility, for such projects contribute to the city's efficiency, improve air quality, create greener spaces, thereby fostering values that ultimately enhance the communal and individual wellbeing of its people (cf. Paris 2022b).

### (b) *Civically Responsible and Educative Design*

Designs like the SNFCC and Greener Grangetown do not manifest values in silos, of course. For when we are in the presence and aware of such Designs that put us in touch with central values, we in turn become mindful of civic responsibility, which, in turn, can play an educative role. After all, much of our education comes from being in the presence of exemplars that we find imitably admirable (Zagzebski 2017), or delightful for their beauty (Paris 2022a), and naturally, perhaps sub-personally, develop an inclination to live up to the values that they embody.

This kind of civically responsible and educative Design beauty can be seen clearly in the Wales Millennium Centre (WMC), a building otherwise hardly visually attractive: an imposing block of steel that towers over those approaching, with a massive bilingual inscription “Creu Gwir fel Gwydr o Ffwrnais Awen<sup>28</sup> | In These Stones Horizons Sing”. Yet behind the letters of its massive façade is glass—reflecting light during the day, glowing at night; and, underneath the steel structure, a row of glass doors encourages potential visitors.

This monumental building boldly announces the values that its architect, Jonathan Adams, sought to embody in it, and does so not just symbolically, but quite literally: “the exterior of the building, 4,500 tonnes of structural steel was clad in 2,000 tonnes of recycled Welsh slate, reclaimed from waste spoils”; the inscription was composed by Gwyneth Lewis, former national poet of Wales and carved in “large Celtic lettering ... represent[ing] the ancient tradition of stone carving but also the artistic excellence, values and integrity found inside the building, reflected to the world by the glass used within each letter” (WMC website). But what's the building for?

Like the SNFCC, the WMC is home to the Welsh National Opera. On the inside, the theatre that hosts the company's performances, testifies, through its Design, to the care taken to house one of the UK's best opera companies, enabling it to affect audiences. It thereby testifies also to the value placed upon it. This is evinced not only through its large capacity, but also in the way it's been

studiously calculated to enhance voice rather than orchestra, comprising 44,000 acoustic bricks that ensure soundproofing, reduce reverberation, and absorb sound, as well as holes in each individual auditorium seat, to ensure excellent acoustics throughout.

Though—like the working-class roots of the Welsh National Opera itself—it may not be immediately apparent, and may require some research to establish, unifying values that are recognisably central to Welsh identity and its working-class, industrial roots, with the arts, is a powerful statement about the value placed on the latter. In this way, the WMC stands as a monument to Welsh culture and one of its greatest modern contributions to the British arts: the Welsh National Opera. In doing so, it announces these values to the many visitors and passersby, who, if only briefly, will become mindful of them, something that only a handful of modern buildings can claim to do.

(c) *Compassion, Respect, Inclusivity; Or, Care-full Design*

What lesson can we draw from the above? Let's try to arrive at it through a final everyday example. It's well known that ergonomics revolutionised Design and brought in new standards for its beauty. I am currently writing from a sit-stand desk, sat upon an ergonomic chair, which combination is working great for my back pain. I can only imagine how others, whose needs are perhaps harder to meet currently, feel when they encounter Designs that meet their needs.

But let me not lose sight of what we're after in this subsection: the common denominator behind the examples of beautiful Design we've examined is, I suggest, that they're all brimming with *care*.<sup>29</sup> This is unsurprising given the ethical nature of Design. But it's also unsurprising if Forsey (2013; 2025) and Parsons (2015) are right about the nature of Design more generally, and Gal & Ventura (2024: 259–264) about its ethical basis in care more specifically. For if these philosophers are right, Design is to be appreciated from a user-end perspective. So when it facilitates and enhances usage, and when the relevant usage can be counted as ethically good, broadly speaking, then the trait that becomes most salient if we think in terms of the manifested Designer is genuine care: not the kind of care that we get in craft, the care in crafting, shaping, moulding the object into its final state; but the care that comes from being compassionate, respectful, and thoughtful about what would be good for different users of your Design. In slogan terms, beautiful Design is *care-full* Design.

## 6. Amoral Design: An Objection

The view that beautiful Design, and Design more generally, is ethical in nature flies in the face of much Design that is evidently amoral. Consider the muffin pouffe designed by Matteo Bianchi. There's nothing remotely morally salient about it. Hence, while some beauty in Design might have the ethical component discussed, not all of it does.

In response, we should begin by distinguishing between the ethical and the moral. Morality is concerned particularly with other-regarding attitudes and behaviours. In this sense of the moral, virtually no Design can be classified as moral. The ethical, however, is broader and, though it contains the moral, comprises more generally concern for the good or wellbeing of human beings in general. It's in this sense that I claim Design to be ethical in nature.

Now, under this construal of the ethical, plus the plausible assumption that exercising our distinctively human capacities in ways that are not harmful to others is good (a view going back at least to Plato and Aristotle), we can see how the muffin pouffe can be said to offer certain ethically salient affordances: for, like the gluggle jug, it embodies a visual metaphor, inviting us to engage in imaginative play with the potential to enhance our capacities for creativity and enrich imaginative, visual, and, ultimately, conceptual links and associations (cf. Gal 2022). Even here, then, we find care—for the user's creativity, sensibilities, capacities, and enjoyment—embodied in the object's Design.

This way of seeing the ethical nature of beautiful Design allows us to see a point that is true of beauty more generally: namely that even while sometimes it may appear that beauty does not stem from any link to (other) functions or values, this is often a superficial appearance. For further

probing reveals that, on some level, there may still be some beauty there owing to functional considerations—and hence that should properly be thought of in ethical terms.

### Conclusion

I argued that beautiful Design comprises an ineliminable ethical dimension. Having shown that prominent accounts of Design aesthetics, and ethical, normative accounts of Design fail to truly appreciate its hybrid nature and to incorporate both formal and functional considerations into an account of its appreciation, I suggested that a version of functional beauty—axiological functional beauty—which is sensitive to the affective import of functions' non-aesthetic value, is better suited to the multifaceted nature of Design, its inextricability from ethical considerations, and the fluidity of both its functional and formal components.

The account offered here can, I think, be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to other domains guided by human intention—ones that fall under the broad aspect of design, to the extent that these, too, comprise functionally-informed form. Perhaps by applying them thus we will come to understand the insight expressed by designers like Renzo Piano, and beautifully put by W.E.B. Du Bois, who sought “with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right” (1926). The question is: what kind of beauty? I hope my paper is part of the answer.<sup>30</sup>

*Department of Philosophy,  
Cardiff University, UK*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Recently ‘natural design’ has also entered our conceptual repertoire, since natural processes like natural or sexual selection, albeit not guided by intention, are nonetheless guided by intelligible principles of which some are, arguably, teleological.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, some Design theorists whose outlook is ethical, encourage us to conceive of Design broadly (cf. Papanek 1971; Petroski: 2006).

<sup>3</sup> I’m not making any strong ontological claims here, nor any assumptions as to how functions are specified, etc., though I say more to say on this latter issue below in §4.2.

<sup>4</sup> By contrast to purely theoretical, expressive, symbolic, etc., though, as we’ll see below (§4.2.2), this is only true with respect to some, albeit central, functions of design.

<sup>5</sup> Though Parsons’ conception of “surface” is somewhat unusual in that he understands it as an object’s usability (2015: 23), or how it performs its functions from a user’s perspective. In this respect his view is amenable to the account I offer below. In general, however, Parsons focuses too narrowly on visual appearances.

<sup>6</sup> Though rarely expressed clearly or explicitly, save by Zangwill (2000).

<sup>7</sup> This is related to what Parsons and Carlson (2008: 45–49) call the ‘translation problem’.

<sup>8</sup> Also most explicitly adopted by Zangwill (2000).

<sup>9</sup> Parsons and Carlson (2008: 49–57) call this the ‘indeterminacy of function’ problem.

<sup>10</sup> This narrowing is also, I submit, the sorts of the worries identified in §1.2. This becomes clearer if we remind ourselves of the historical reflections with which I opened this essay.

<sup>11</sup> Though, I suspect, a craftsperson or builder might well beg to differ, and I would humbly defer to their judgement.

<sup>12</sup>See also note 22 below.

<sup>13</sup>Incidentally, the University, I am told, is seeking its removal.

<sup>14</sup>Parsons (2015: 81) draws an interesting contrast between Design that is mendacious and thus manipulative, and Design that is playful and, though inviting us to fantasise, does not lead us into delusions by way of getting something out of us. Cf. §4.2.2 below.

<sup>15</sup>Gal & Ventura (2024) contains excellent discussions of these aspects of Design. The discussion below echoes some key concerns among Modernist theorists with Design's excessive focus on visual appearance. See Loos (2019) and the discussion in Parsons (2015: chapter 3).

<sup>16</sup>Such instant recognisability may seem to be undercut by the many imitations available, but I doubt that this is so—the owner's knowledge that their bag is genuine is itself a source of self-congratulation. *They* know, those who need to know know, and that's enough. This means that such imitability may itself be part of the Design, and serve to reinforce such self-assurance.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Gal & Ventura (2024: chapter 1), who distinguish between descriptive and normative definitions of Design.

<sup>18</sup>Though that seems unlikely. After all, Forsey opens her essay by announcing that “[b]eauty is the original focus of philosophical aesthetics, and has a complicated history, as being connected from as far back as Plato with both truth and moral goodness”. What's more likely, then, is that what's absent is a theory of beauty that contemporary philosophers find palatable.

<sup>19</sup>For more on this distinction, see (Paris 2024b).

<sup>20</sup>These, in turn, address the problems that contemporary accounts of the aesthetics of Design face; see §2.3–2.4, above.

<sup>21</sup>Remember that I'm taking 'form' to comprise an object's set of elements and their interrelations, provided these can be directly apprehended (cf. Paris 2024a), so I'm not confining beauty to the distally perceptible.

<sup>22</sup>This link to value is further illustrated by an experiential shift among people's attitudes towards oximeters, when these devices became household items during the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially seen as wonderfully helpful, many people began seeing oximeters as racist Designs that made them deeply uncomfortable, when it was revealed that the way they work makes them unsuitable for accurately measuring the blood oxygen concentration of black people (cf. Gal & Ventura 2024: 162–164).

<sup>23</sup>At least given the resources and technologies available at the time.

<sup>24</sup>Compare the debate over the renovation of the Royal Ontario Museum discussed by Parsons (2015: 86).

<sup>25</sup>Perhaps the gluggle jug can be criticised as kitsch, though I don't think I agree with this charge, partly because of its self-conscious playfulness and unpretentiousness, as well as the functional aspects discussed in this paragraph.

<sup>26</sup>On the difficulty of sharply distinguishing between form and function, see Gal & Ventura (2024: ch. 2).

<sup>27</sup>Which also has aspects of what I've labelled manipulative Design, having restricted compatibility and luring users to constantly renew their devices and purchase more products (Gal & Ventura 2024: 150).

<sup>28</sup>“Creating truth like glass from inspiration's furnace”.

<sup>29</sup>For a brilliant study of care in aesthetics, see Saito 2022.

<sup>30</sup>I'm grateful to Michalle Gal for inviting and encouraging me to write this article on this exciting topic and for invaluable feedback on previous drafts. Thanks also to the Cardiff Civic Society for sharing their knowledge of local Design, and to Sofia Lazaridi for helpful suggestions.

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