Design and Definitions: Reflections on the Question of "What is Design?"

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Abstract: This essay presents the framework of the discourse of definitions and the plausible path to a definition of design, which is classified as a "contested concept". It concludes by trying to supply a possible version of what is called, after Morris Weitz, an "honorific definition" of design, which is a result of the synthesis between the modernist and the postmodernist definitions of design. It is claimed that design is the intersection of modernist functionality and post-postmodernist self-expression across various platforms of consumer products, self-curation, and communities. This formulation shifts the focus from the abstract designer's plans to the particular activities of the users. Aiming to open up a space for an aspect of the theory of design oriented to the user, one that takes into account the relation of design practice to user practice, the essay criticizes the narrow approaches that classify modernist design as paradigmatic to design in general. The author provides an example of this through the daily use of Facebook, as it not only shapes the way we perceive the world and lives our lives but also influences how we design our lives.8

The new definition should reconcile the gap between the modern and the postmodern, by encompassing the interaction of the designer and the experienced world, as it is designed and redesigned by engaged users.

Keywords: Design, definitions, contested concepts, modernism, postmodernism, functionalism, Facebook

The opening chapter of Glenn Parsons' *The Philosophy of Design* asks "What is design?" Going back to Socrates, and probably earlier, this is the way philosophical debates begin: "What is beauty?" "What is love?" "What is justice?" "What is friendship?" Before answering the question we must know something about the form of the question itself. The question asks for a description, a definition, of the inner essence of the thing under consideration, or, something a bit different, the essence of the concept. Requests for the essence of the concept are more present-oriented: "what do people mean when they use this word now?" Requests for a description of the essence of the thing are more future or ideal-oriented: "what *should* this word mean?" Keeping the two distinct is difficult since each sometimes disguises itself as the other, and it seems that whenever we look into one we seem to be looking at the other. However the second question is primary in philosophy: seeking for a philosophical definition is quite different from seeking for a dictionary definition.

Not all concepts are up for philosophical definition. We are looking for definitions of what Richard Gallie called "essentially contested concepts," that is, concepts for which philosophers offer competing definitions. (Gallie 1956a, 1956b) It seems like a worthy project. Yet the history of each such effort is usually seen as a history of failures. We see this in attempts to define "art" and "democracy." However, not all philosophers see it this way. Dialecticians, for example, Hegelians and Marxists, see the history of competing definitions as a matter of each successive definition being an advance on the preceding dominant definition, as an antithesis to a thesis, or as a synthesis which

itself is a new thesis. In this paper I will combine a simple version of this approach with the thinking of Morris Weitz on the definition of such "open concepts" as "art" to arrive at a general idea of essentially contested concepts. I will then apply this specifically to the concept of design. Whereas most theories of design focus on genius designers, for example Charles Eames, my concern will be with the user's or consumer's practices with designed objects, practices which piggyback on designers' designs. I will focus even more specifically on user's designing uses of the Facebook platform. I choose this because the dominance of social media characterizes our own era as distinct from ones in which pre-modernist, modernist, and even postmodernist theories of design were developed. My approach is pragmatist in the tradition of John Dewey in that the emphasis is on the interaction of practices and on the relation between these and the experiences of socially connected humans. For Dewey, the artist creates with the view to how the audience will experience, the experience being the key thing. Dewey stresses the continuity of fine art and everyday life. Similarly I will stress the continuity of design and everyday life. Although design may already seem a region *within* everyday aesthetics to some there is a distance here, somewhat like that of the distance between art and life.

"Design" has only recently become an essentially contested concept. There was no philosophical debate over design in the 17th century. But with the rise of mass production, two competing theories of design arose, design as functionality and design as style. (Hamilton) But before going into that, let us step back and consider the nature of philosophical debate over such things as the definition of "design." Philosophers take different views of what is expected of philosophical inquiry into concepts. Parsons, for example, thinks a definition of design in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is required. Jane Forsey thinks that in the case of design one should just give up on such a definition because design evolves historically. I argue, contrary to both, that the history of such efforts is a history neither of failed efforts nor gradual convergence on the truth but of a dialectical process that is essentially open and unending, but within which we can speak of relative progress. Instead of a history of failures I see a history of more or less successful attempts, each successful in terms of its most relevant contexts of reception, i.e. whether, and to what extent, it was useful and "true" in a pragmatist sense of the term, at a particular time and place. New ages need new definitions of essentially-contested concepts. Also, even though each definition, at one time, came to be seen as a failure by some, there is continued life in each. Past definitions can be reinterpreted and revived. This is part of the idea behind dialectic; that the synthesis is a revival, in some way, of the thesis. Each touted definition in definitional history of a concept is both failure, in that counterexamples and counterarguments immediately emerge, and success, in that (1) a new style of creative endeavor is confirmed and encouraged, and (2) new efforts at constitution and reconstitution of the concept and thing conceptualized are stimulated. That is, success is not only a function of fit to the time and place but also future-directed fruitfulness.

Some believe that the philosopher should stop with describing the current conception of X, for example of design, or at least with describing the concept that makes the most logical sense. It is thought by some, for example, that the philosopher of design should sit back and wait for the designers and design theorists to do the real work of revealing the emerging/changing essence (or concept) of design, and then just describe. But there is also a normative dimension to philosophy: it is not only about what is but is also about what should be. Limiting the philosopher to the descriptive makes philosophy too much like lexicography, and too much unlike design theory and design itself. The philosopher of design and the design theorist are not so far apart as some think. Culturally, we are all in this together. We need to take a holistic approach to culture and definition recognizing that different disciplines often do something very similar but with different vocabularies and in different contexts.

Philosopher of design, design theorist, and designer are all engaged in deeper questions of self-understanding than just asking for a conventional or useful definition of "design." When Adolf Loos (a design theorist and a designer) said that ornament is crime he was making a claim that was part of a much larger critique of his own culture. He was asking questions of the sort "what is culture?"

"what, now, is Europe?" and even "what is man?" Each serious and deep exploration of essentially contested concepts seeks out answers to these, and other questions… by implication. This is why significant designers as well as design theorists can be seen as implicit philosophers of design, and why their writings can and should be taught in a philosophy of design class.

Nor does the philosopher usually stand back, but rather allies him or herself with not simply a descriptive but with a normative definition, sometimes by way of allying him or herself with a certain style or design practice. Parsons for example, begins with a more abstract definition of design in terms of intentional problem solving. Here is his definition: "Design is the intentional solution of a problem, by the creation of plans for a new sort of thing, where the plans would not be immediately seen, by a reasonable person, as an inadequate solution." (Parsons 11) He later clarifies this in a normative way by allying himself with modernism and functionalism. He sees the Modernist movement as a template for the Philosophy of Design. Although he defines design in terms of intentional solution of problems he is mainly concerned with the work of "Designers" (he uses the capitalization).

I have no objection to a theory of design that focuses on designers, particularly on the great designers. In the end, this may be the most fruitful way to understand the changing/emerging essence of design. The problem arises when overemphasis on the great designers may occlude everything else. I seek only to open up a space for an aspect of theory of design oriented to the user, one that takes into account the relation of design practice to user practice. In a Hegelian move, I suggest that Modernism as a theory of design is thesis; that Postmodernism, which stresses the reader, the interpreter, and the user, is the antithesis; and that some sort of synthesis of the two is the next obvious step. The designing activity of the user is of equal in importance to that of the designer.

Modernism and the closely associated concept of functionalism, upon which Parsons mainly bases his analysis, are, simply stated, old-fashioned and outdated. I am not saying that functionalism itself is old-fashioned, but the modernist version of functionalism, i.e. in which "function" is seen in a narrow way, is. Postmodern architecture already posed an antithesis to the modernist ideals of design. For postmodernism, the expressive qualities of decorative symbolism regained a foothold, and strict functionalism receded. But the postmodern reaction was short-lived. It was soon recognized that we need to return to some aspects and some of the terms of modernism, where democratization and less abstracted more concretized functionalism takes the center stage. Here, functionalism should be seen, as Yuriko Saito has recently argued, in terms of larger functions, for example in terms of ecological considerations, especially those that come with the current disaster of human induced climate change. (Saito)

An inspiration for my approach here is the theoretical and architectural work of Leddy, Maytum, Stacey, or LMSarch, on environmentally sustainable and mission-driven architecture where emphasis is placed, as with Saito, on a larger notion functionality, functionality within the context of climate change and contemporary issues of social justice. (LMSarch) I am suggesting that the work of LMSarch implies a philosophy of design (as expressed not only in their designs but in their book *Practice with Purpose*) that points to a synthetic next stage in the dialectic of design. Another inspiration will come from my own experiences with Facebook and reflection on the role of the user in design.

To elaborate: each effort to define essentially-contested concepts like "design" are, at the same time, efforts, by implication, to answer at least some of the really big questions …. for our time. Put in Hegelian terms, Spirit is trying to understand itself, which, in my secular way of looking at things, simply means that all inquirers who inquire in a deep way (i.e. into essences) are trying to take the next step that will, at least temporarily, solve the largest problems of our time, at least conceptually. The exploration of the essence of design in this respect is very much like the exploration of the essence of art.

Parsons, who sees Modernism as a more or less permanent discovery of the principles of design, worries that it might be seen as just another style. On his view, in order to speak of Postmodernism we need to speak of Modernism as having ended, and that this begs the question as to the validity of

its claims. (Parsons 65) In short, "Modernism" could just imply the principles of good design finally discovered by Modernist Designers. And yet, in a way Modernism IS just a style. Not only did it have its moment, it also had its stages. Modernist architecture and design has a distinctive look. Moreover, even though Modernism opposed decoration and ornament, i.e. the non-functional, the importance of detailing in modernist architecture could be said to constitute its own form of decoration.

Each style is itself an implicit definition of design. Each style, in turn, is closely connected with a worldview, with an intuition about the essence of design, among other things, which now has a place in history, although it can still be a legitimate fount of inspiration. And we must not forget that the evolution of design happens very much in tandem with the history of art, where, for example, a style of design like Art Nouveau also had its associated artists and art movements. They even have their associated philosophers: Bergson, for instance, in the case of Art Nouveau. (Braiterman)

Rather than heading to the design section of the Museum of Modern Art to define "design" I begin with a place where design enters into our lives right now. Walking through campus, I notice that fully a third of the people I see are looking at electronic screens. We live today in the intersection between our screens and the world, and the predominant mediation of this interaction are the media platforms we use.

Platforms, such as Facebook, are designed in a myriad of ways and aspects. We do not normally contemplate the design of these platforms as we might the design of a classic car, but they form a pervasive background for our everyday lives. They are not only designed themselves but they also shape the way we see the world and the way we live our lives. They shape how we *design* our lives.

You click on the FB app on your phone. You see a screen with the word "Facebook" on the top left. You see a plus and a magnifying glass. You see a picture of yourself and the famous FB question: "What is on your mind?" You see "Create story" with a white plus on a blue field. You see, swishing down with your finger, a seemingly endless series of posts, some from friends, some from groups, some from advertisers, each with the name of the poster, and most with both images and text. Clicking on your own page you see a picture of yourself, details of your profile, some pictures of friends along with their names, and your own posts going back in time as you swish down again. This page is the one with self-curation in mind. The term "self-curation" is a metaphor drawn from the practice of art curators, and so there is some notion here of arranging presentations of oneself as though one were a work of art, or a show. It implies conscious shaping of an image of the self. It is not normally considered art itself. But the self-created self is something designed by the self, and has aesthetic properties.

But in order to understand the design of Facebook we have to look at how it works in daily use. Take taking a walk as an example. Here I will draw on my own recent experience. When I was younger, taking a walk was just a matter of moving my body through space. But now, usually, I have with me my iPhone. And that connects me to all sorts of things: I can phone my friend, read the news, take photographs, post on Facebook, check the weather, and so forth.

Let us look at one type of act using these technologies in terms of the "What is design?" question. I take a picture of something I find visually interesting and post it on Facebook in a photography group to which I belong. To do this, there is a path I can quickly take through about four steps to the actual posting. Then I can check later to see whether any of my friends have "liked," "loved" or commented on my photo. This can be pleasurable and self-affirming. Admittedly, it can also be addictive, as one can be caught in an endless cycle of checking and re-checking the phone. There is both a positive and negative aesthetic of iPhone/Facebook experience. But let us focus on the way that a Facebook posting can create a world based on materials taken from the world.

Of course what the FB user does is not Design in the sense of the creation of a new kind of thing, as found for example in Parsons' definition of design. (Parsons 9) Creating such a world is not in a significant way like designing the Eames chair. We do, of course, talk about design of the iPhone and of the Facebook site themselves. However what I am concerned with here is what happens on top of

that. So I am speaking of a broader sense of design that includes the designs (not only plans and intentions, but makings) of the consumer.

One dictionary definition of design is "an arrangement of lines or shapes created to form a pattern or decoration." Posting a photograph on FB requires first taking the photograph. Photographers design the pictures they take. They arrange lines and shapes in photography by way of selection of frame and choosing the moment when the shot is taken. They form patterns when taking photographs. This kind of pattern-making is continuous with the pattern-making one engages in when posting photos in such a way as to curate oneself. When engaged in social media people also make choices and form patterns through posting, which is a different kind of pattern from that found in the photograph itself. They digest and consume the world through a process of selective reproduction. These patterns, grabbed from the world and reshaped to their own taste, decorate their FB feed.

This may seem a strange use of the word "decorate." But it points to the thought that designing is not always a form of problem solving. Nor is it always a matter of creating a new sort of thing. One can design a teapot for example in a certain style: such a teapot is not a new sort of thing in any strong sense, even though it is possible to reproduce it. Architecture, as Parsons observes, is often designed with one instantiation in mind. One must of course distinguish between the design as instantiated in the architect's drawing and the design as instantiated in the finished building.

In Facebook there are at least three designers. First are the deep designers of computer languages. Then there is the layer of designers who create the things I see here, the phone itself, the platform with its functionality: the visuals, sounds and feels of that functionality. There is also the layer of my own designing, where I take the photograph and post it. And if I post every day, there is another element of design in this series as a series. These activities are not so easily understood in terms of ideas of functionality.

Such philosophers as Nietzsche and Foucault have famously talked about self-creation as a form of art. Today the idea of the curated self has been applied to social media activities. (Karsch) The social self-presentation through posting is itself curated. It is usually curated to display a life-style, which includes a display of personal taste. Thus there is something fundamentally aesthetic about this practice.

Design may also include what happens in everyday experience in tandem with. As my teacher Marx Wartofksy argued, from a Hegelian-Marxist perspective, the eye itself changes with the means of production. (T. Leddy 2014) My eye has changed in my daily walk as it mediates between the physical world, the city, in which I live, and multiple curated worlds operating on a set of designed platforms, including Facebook. This changes what I see, how I see, and generally how I experience. The means of production changes perception, and perception changes with the Zeitgeist. The Zeitgeist emerges from the relations of production. This is not just effected by a small elite group of Designers. The Designer forms just the basis of a dialectic between Designer and user in which both agents design and redesign the world we live in and experience.

Morris Weitz famously argued that all previous attempts to define art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions have failed. (Weitz) What is often forgotten about Weitz is that he also believed in the value of what he called "honorific definitions." These are not definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. They define something in terms of a preferred property. He believed that the previous great theories of art, for example Clive Bell's theory that art is "significant form," should be seen as honorific definitions of art. My historical approach to defining such things as "art" and "design" goes back to Weitz's idea of honorific definitions. In order to create the next good definition of "art" or "design" one must investigate experience to capture the emerging essence, i.e. of art or design. If we follow Weitz the difference between philosophy of design and design theory will not be very strict. An honorific definition calls on us to attend to certain properties. Honorific definitions of design are, then, very much about design criticism and practice. They are normative rather than descriptive.

There is a difference between Weitz's and my own language which should be noted here. For Weitz honorific definitions just are recommendations to attend to certain properties whereas I speak of capturing the "emerging essence" of the essentially contested concept under consideration. Honorific definitions are not valuable just because of reasons given debates over changing criteria of evaluation, as Weitz argues. These debates arise out of different competing visions of the essential nature of, e.g., design. It is competing world views combined with competing practices and experiential gestalts, not just competing reasons and preferences that generate new definitions. Weitz combined with Hegel means that competing theories are arranged historically in a dialectical fashion.

Practical considerations will determine what new philosophy of design is emergent as dominant. It is too soon to say precisely what counts as the dominant theory in 2023. I favor the design philosophy of LSMarch (or any similar design philosophy) where considerations of global warming and social justice are among the determinants. (LSMarch) Although Weitz showed us that, for open concepts like art and design, there is no definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and none forthcoming, there are definitions that look a lot like that and yet are really honorific definitions. The openness of design as a concept (or "art" for that matter) is a function of readiness of emergence of new honorific definitions in response to situational, cultural and environmental changes.

So we live in this sea of designed things upon which we as a set of layered communities have designed for the delight of each other. These things (in the case of social media) are platforms designed for the practical purpose of gaining revenues from advertising and merchandizing of products, which themselves are part of this important economy of design. We notice however that although this describes design as it really operates in an important aspect of the second decade of the 21st century, it also describes a situation of aesthetic flatness and alienation. Our lives are not entirely meaningless in this situation of design. In this paper I have worked with two paradigms, one of the user's experience in FB and one of sustainability-oriented architecture as practiced by LMSarch. The first is oriented more to self-expression and personal lifestyle, the second to construction of a viable social world.

What then is my honorific definition of design? I don't have one, but I have a rough idea of what it would look like if I did. It would not be a matter of narrow function or of mere decoration. All honorific definitions are inspired by a paradigm, for instance, Clive Bell's honorific definition of art was inspired by Cezanne. Mine is inspired by the design philosophy of LSMarch and by my own FB experience. My working metaphor for design is functionalism within the context of sustainability but with the aura of heightened aesthetic quality. Design is the scene of after-modernist and post-postmodernist functional self-expressive interconnectedness between platforms, consumer products, self-curation, and communities. A new definition is needed that resolves the dialectic between the modern and the postmodern, that describes an ideal of design where depth and reflection are re-introduced and the world re-enchanted though sustainability aesthetically enhanced. The new definition of design would cover the interaction of designer and the experienced world as designed and redesigned by engaged users.

It might be said that what FB users and architect-designed building users do require something more to count as a form of design on its own account. It might further be argued that what is done by users in FB at least is more problem than solution, more negatively than positively aesthetic. The problem with most of the experienced worlds of FB is that they are singularly NOT designed. A critic might see FB activity is little more than the repetitive act of looking at one post after another while responding minimally. After a while it can all get a bit boring. Still, the user's activity can vary, ranging from the banal to something more refined, and this would roughly parallel the range of quality in the appreciation of fine art.

The everyday practice I am describing, a practice of self-design and self-curating (cf. Gianini) within the context of social media and the intersection of that with the worlds of everyday life by way of minor quasi-artistic acts such as taking and posting photographs is, then, not the work of someone called a "designer" or by any sort of design professional. As admitted above, this practice

piggybacks on designs created by professional designers, for example, the design of Facebook. But most things are like that.

Perhaps what I am describing is a metaphor, for designing involves, as Hamilton argues, improving the look of a product through style or decoration (Hamilton 54) and there are no designed products here, except metaphorically the self of the user, or the users experienced world. Similarly, one can seldom see the activity of FB self-curation as problem-solving, except metaphorically as the problem-solving entailed in self-curation itself.

Conclusion

Before considering the question of the philosophy of design and the question of the definition of design we need to consider the meta-question, the question about the quest for definition itself. There is an alternative to a search for a strict definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Drawing from Weitz and Hegel we can speak of honorific definitions of essentially contested concepts as competing dialectically over the swath of history and across disciplines. Looking at the debate over "design" we see that something needs to come after modernism and postmodernism. The definition of design need not focus simply on the designer but must reference the user. In the context of architecture, this implies much closer attention to needs, to how users will live parts of their lives in this building, and how this fits into a broader, ethical, notion of function and functionality. In a social media context, it will focus on how the user designs in the act of self-curation.

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