

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2019 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857559926, DOI 10.7413/18258630063

## EXPERIENCE DESIGN

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*(First published November 30, 2019)*

It. *Experience Design*, Fr. *Experience Design*, Germ. *Experience Design*, Span. *Experience Design*. From experience, i.e. what is done and undergone, what can be memorable or emerge as distinctive, and also, being a matter of degree, what can, at some point, become as integrated as not to be consciously carried out; and from design, i.e. the process of management and organization of a complexity, through the intensification and enhancement of already existing elements, which are (more or less serially) made available to consumers. Broadly speaking Experience Design concerns the cyclical construction, valorization and normalization of experiences that are gratifying as they are effective, lying on a threshold between awareness, or salience (i.e. how to afford, engage someone in doing something) and automatism, or embeddedness (i.e. how to make this process as seamless and immersive as possible).

### (EXPERIENCE) DESIGN AS A NEW PARADIGM FOR AESTHETICS

Dealing with (experience) design calls for a specific conception of aesthetics. Drawing from the tradition of critical phenomenology and pragmatism, aesthetic experience can be understood as a relational modality which is gratifying insofar as it affords engaging or immersive relationships between the individual and the environment. Yet this conception of experience is strongly dialectical and holistic, since it relies on a processual basis, that is, on the idea that experience is always the (contingent) outcome of the ongoing interactions and reactions among various vectors that constitute the experiential field. This specific understanding of aesthetic experience, which does not focus either on an "object" or a "subject", but on their relationship, appears fruitful not the least because it allows tracing a distinction between the aesthetic experience of artistic or natural elements (following a traditional conception of aesthetics) and the aesthetic experience of the everyday.

In the first case, being perfectly “inside” the aesthetic relationship does not rule out the fact that such relationship may be dissonant or even aporetic (as proved by the fact that aesthetic value has been recognized to works which are particularly complex, or even incomplete, or to natural disasters, for instance). In the second case, the gratification that is immanent in aesthetic experience exclusively concerns harmonious relationships, in which the degree of facilitation of experiences is maximized. And it can't be denied that the facilitation of experiences is exactly the kernel of design.

Design consists of a process or of a series of processes that are aimed at eliminating the conflict or friction that may interfere with the fulfilment of and hence with the gratification provided by a specific interaction. Such understanding of design would hence require a distinction between experience design, critical design, designart and anti-design, just to mention a few design forms that emphasize aspects which are more or less frustrating, contemplative, or engaging for the user.

### EXPERIENCE DESIGN: THE ODD COUPLE

Speaking of a “design of experiences” may hence sound redundant. Such definition may also sound oxymoronic, when thinking that it is bringing together what is supposed to be intrinsically spontaneous and natural as experience, with what is instead intrinsically artificial as design. Yet, if a processual perspective on experience, and an idea of identity as something that is defined on the threshold of various elements dialectically interacting is undertaken, the opposition between artificiality and naturality fades.

Affording a happy (that is, immediate) but not simple (that is, mediated) interaction, since it is the result of processes of management and organization of already existing materials, is a fundamental principle in Experience Design (Iannilli 2019). The latter, in fact, is all the better successful if it makes what is “artificial” appear as “natural”. Such a widespread facilitation of experience in everyday life on the one hand can surely be gratifying and hence positive, yet, on the other hand, can also raise some issues. For instance, it can lead to a certain lack of experience resulting in alienation (if “delegated”) and/or inconsiderate hedonism (if “ab-used”), and hence be negative, or unsustainable, both for the individual and for the environment.

### FROM OBJECTS (TO USERS) TO EXPERIENCES

It is only in the last three-four decades that a dramatic dematerialization, spreading and embodiment of design in everyday practices has taken place. This process can be described in terms of a shift from the design of objects to the design of experiences.

The history of design starts in 1851, with the first World Fair, “The Great Exhibition” (see Vitta 2012; Mecacci 2012; Iannilli 2019). For the first time, objects intended for everyday use were exhibited, mainly for commercial purposes, while at the same time claiming the recognition of their “aesthetic dignity”, by presenting also “formal” features. Such a multifaceted identity is often difficult to grasp theoretically, being constituted by at least three important elements: the practical, the economic and the aesthetic. This

controversial (as it is hard to univocally address and define) nature of design is rooted in this occasion and runs throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. It can be described in terms of two poles generally represented by the concepts of “function” and “form”.

The point is that since its origins design, with a greater or lesser emphasis on one of these poles, and with more or less success, has had (and still has) as its fulcrum that of profiling, of shaping experiences: in these terms “Experience Design” should not sound as redundant, actually being a radicalization of this distinctive feature of design.

However, the first explicit thematization of design as conducive to experience and of the related discipline, has mainly taken place between the 1980s and the 1990s, when the development of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) took a specific direction. It is not of secondary importance the increasingly central role assumed by digital technologies (Marfia, Matteucci 2018) in this process. In this sense, the digital can be considered a fourth, important element defining design.

Spence (2016), partly drawing from Bødker (2006), reconstructs what have been defined the “three waves of HCI”: 1<sup>st</sup> wave, early 1980s: “It involved many things that were physical and relatively easy to measure”; 2<sup>nd</sup> wave, 1980s-1990s: “Began to require a way of accounting for context and social interaction”; 3<sup>rd</sup> wave, today: “Is now pushing the boundaries of what can be effectively conceptualized, much less studied or measured” (Spence 2016: 37).

This is basically the description of the progressive attempts to conceptualize not easily quantifiable elements by assuming a holistic and environmental approach, and not least, the progressive attempts carried out by designers to define what experience is. This passage is important because it is made by one or more disciplines that tend to rely on empirical data and exact measurements, unlike what has been traditionally carried out by a specific aesthetic-philosophical tradition which, starting from W. Dilthey, through G. Simmel and W. Benjamin to J. Dewey, has made the qualitative dimension of experience in increasingly anthropized environments its focal point (but see also Michaud 2003, a pioneering contemporary work in theorizing the cruciality of experiences in today’s society with a focus on the arts; and with a more specific focus on design, that is, on experience design, Michaud 2013).

One of the most extensive works in this sense is Wright, McCarthy (2004) who, not coincidentally, largely base their analysis of technology as experience on Dewey’s thought.

Interestingly, they also provide a detailed explanation, drawing from Kuutti (2001), of how the perception of the role of the user has changed over the last four decades in HCI: a cog in a rational-virtual machine in the 1970s-1980s; a source of error in the 1980s; a social actor in the 1990s; a consumer at the end of the 1990s-beginning of 2000s. A further way to describe the “aesthetic user” could be as a “hyper-consumer” (as recently suggested by Matteucci 2019 and with a specific link to Experience Design, Iannilli forthcoming).

This path in the history of the user corresponds to a shift of priority in Interaction Design from “pure and simple” Usability to User Experience. User Experience Design, in fact, prioritizes the production of interactive experiences, in which the importance of “the ability of a product to provide the functions in an

easy and efficient way" (Hassenzahl 2003) that is a typical feature of Usability, is progressively reduced, while the possibility of affording a more layered kind of experience to a user becomes central. This shift signals a general tendency to overcome a minimalist/simplicity-oriented, or cognitivist approach to Interaction Design and to emphasize aspects deemed belonging to the aesthetic sphere (fun; emotion; delight; performance...).

Nevertheless, with User Experience Design we are not exactly talking of Experience Design yet, given the stress (at least nominally, that is, starting from the label) on the usage, on the evident mediation of something.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The literature on Experience Design, i.e. the research that explicitly thematizes this specific label, is still in an early stage and sometimes there is no clear-cut distinction between various areas in which the design of experiences is central, such as User Experience Design, Experience Design, Experience Marketing (see Schmitt 1999) and Experience Economy (see the seminal text Pine II, Gilmore 1999; 2011, and from a sociological viewpoint Schulze 1992). This is probably due to the interdisciplinary nature of the field, or even of the complexity of the concept itself: not coincidentally, all of these investigations are generally developed around the four distinctive aspects previously ascribed to design: the practical, the economic, the aesthetic and the digital. Here Experience Design is generally described from the point of view of a designer, in terms of a methodology, or approach to design, and issues such as a tension between the qualitative and the quantitative, immediacy and mediation, problem solving and problem setting recur.

Indications on the topic are available on specialized websites, and on a number of essays, book chapters or edited volumes such as Blythe et al. (2009); Forlizzi (2010); Benz (ed. 2015); Poldma (2016); Matté Gagnet (2017). Yet, the main monographs that have extensively addressed Experience Design are just a few, and each of them has a very distinctive take on the subject.

Among them Hassenzahl (2010), who focuses on products and narrativity. He describes experience as "emergent, yet shapeable", basing this claim on the assumption that the many commonalities of experience can be reduced to properties or patterns, and hence, designed.

Then, Newbery, Farnham (2013), focus on brand concept or essence and brand properties. They claim that there is a great difference between the "techniques for delivering value" (the "how"), and value itself (the "why"), which should be Experience Design's priority.

Finally, Spence (2016), drawing from the work of E. Dissanayake and E. Fischer-Lichte, focuses on performativity, and speaks of a "Performative Experience Design" (PED). PED is close to the goals of critical design and so-called "uncomfortable interactions": generating awareness on specific issues and hence transforming the experiencing subject.

## FURTHER QUESTIONS

If the core question these researches, carried out by designers or design theoreticians, tend to answer – within a more general problematizing framework which can also entail ethical, ecological, political, etc. issues – is how to design experiences that are both engaging and effective in their being an intensification or enhancement of specific relationships, another way to address the problem could be from the point of view of the experiencing subject, who is nowadays both facilitated (i.e. emancipated) and challenged (i.e. constrained) by increasingly designed environments.

A question that, following Dewey (1934) and his melioristic approach, may be asked is: when almost everything is designed, and our environments are saturated with pre-constituted experiential frameworks, how can the individual generate new meanings, be creative, and make the difference?

This also calls for a reconsideration of the notion of aesthetic competence: how is it possible to be aesthetically sustainable in the relationship (that is, both in the construction of one own's identity and towards "the other") with designed environments or, in other words, how to be responsible, or able to respond to them, in a way that is also gratifying?

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

G. L. Iannilli, *Experience Design*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2019 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2019/autumn/ExperienceDesign.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630063.

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G. L. Iannilli, *Experience Design*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 2, Milano, Mimesis, 2019.