Object and Soma: Remarks on Aesthetic Appreciation of Design

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Abstract: *In this paper, we examine the object of aesthetic appreciation in discourses on design. While this object is usually considered an external one, somaesthetics focuses on the body of the person doing the appreciating. Based on this duality, we propose a general account of appreciation of the design object through an evaluation of the subject's soma. We provide reasons and examples to explain why our thesis on somatic encounters with embodied designs is, to a high degree, intuitively based on the relational nature of such objects. We conclude by showing how our findings can inform both design theory and practice and potential implications for the latter.*

Keywords: *aesthetic appreciation, body, design, function, design aesthetics.*

1. Introduction

In social reality, humans are constantly surrounded by various kinds of objects. Desks and coffee machines are essential parts of most offices, armchairs and sofas make homes comfortable places, and smartphones and other advanced technological devices have become part and parcel of everyday life. In modern society, it is difficult to imagine living and managing without these objects (although every such object could be relatively easily replaced by a substitute). We treasure them for their functionality, stability, and ergonomic features. They make accomplishing our work, leisure activities, and domestic chores convenient, efficient, and straightforward. Notably, most—if not all—of the abovementioned objects are *designs*.[1]

An effective design is commonly praised for its functionality; however, it is quite rare that such functionality is explicitly linked with design aesthetics. In fact, there is an allegedly strong tension between functionality and the aesthetic in design research, as the latter could somehow harm or distort the former (see, e.g., Folkmann, 2010, p. 40, 2015). Recently, there have been noble attempts to overcome this apparent dichotomy by showing how functionality

1 For the sake of simplicity, we limit our inquiry to design understood as a set of 3-D objects. The aesthetics of design is here invoked upon to investigate the aesthetic appreciation of those objects that we commonly discern from art, which are considered 1) non-utilitarian and requiring an informed hermeneutic analysis and 2) craft objects that are evidently handmade and unique for that reason. For a thorough analysis of this ontology, see Forsey (2013, pp. 9–71. Moreover, in this paper, the issue of design as a process or practice is intentionally left uninvestigated; nevertheless, we believe these findings can inform both design theory and design practice with valuable insights from contemporary aesthetics, following the proposals of several design scholars who emphasize the central role of a deep aesthetic sensibility in design methods, research, and practice (e.g., Friberg, 2013; Buwert, 2015; Folkmann, 2010; Höök, 2018; Dixon, 2020).

and aesthetics go hand in hand (Parsons & Carlson, 2008; Forsey, 2013; Parsons, 2016; Feige, 2018). However, although these theoretical views on design appreciation are very illuminating and theoretically ground-breaking, they lack a somatic perspective and localize the aesthetic in purely intellectual pleasure. Defining aesthetic appreciation in psychological terms can undoubtedly capture essential factors for design theory, such as how to aesthetically code design objects, drive designer's intentions, and test users' competence in identifying the object's function. However, daily encounters with functional objects often occur in more informal and somatically imbued ways, and understanding these factors is an equally valuable task.

Following in the footsteps of these novel attempts in the aesthetics of design and focusing on things in use, this article aims to provide a novel framework for the aesthetic appreciation of design, starting from the concept of the aesthetic understood as essentially embodied. One possible way to include this dimension in the aesthetic theory of design is to adopt the perspective of somaesthetics, which champions the body as the locus of aesthetic value. In doing so, we argue that we might need not only to reconsider *how* we appreciate design but also to reconsider *what* is actually appreciated. Our thesis is as follows: when we aesthetically appreciate design, we also evaluate our body as using and responding to certain objects. In other words, we suggest that what is appreciated is, in fact, a specific *conglomerate* consisting of our body in relation to the body[2] of the object, where the attention is turned both outwards and inwards. The goal is, therefore, to understand in terms by which we can define this inter-body relation as aesthetic.

It is worth mentioning that the proposed thesis is not *universal*. We do not claim that every design must be evaluated in a certain way but rather that objects designed to have a relationship with our body are *also* evaluated based on this relationship at the moment in which this relationship is in place. The thesis here is rather a *modest* one, namely that we wish to point out that there are gradations of appreciation depending on what is addressed: there can be discrete appreciations directed to singular objects, but there are also complex appreciations directed to compound situations. We therefore aim to present a set of reasons explaining why it is worth adopting such an understanding of aesthetic appreciation (at least regarding a specific group of designs) and suggest how this might open up a new perspective for the aesthetics of design.

The paper develops according to the following structure. In §2, we provide a basic overview on the philosophical debate on design to highlight the research gap into which our proposal fits. In §3, we provide reasons and examples to explain why our thesis on the somatic encounters with bodies of designs is highly intuitive. In §4, we address potential challenges to the thesis. Finally, in §5, we draw several conclusions about the implications of our claims.

2. Aesthetics and Design

Numerous contributions have recently addressed the question of the relationship between philosophy and design. A debate involving different philosophical disciplines has originated from the opposing nuances that the notion of technology has assumed along its etymological journey that began with the Greek term *techne*. On the one hand, *techne* refers to expertise: specific know-how that in contemporary discourse is linked to new technologies but, above all, to the cognitive involvement these technologies require. On the other hand, the Greek word *techne* has acquired an artistic nuance in its Latin translation (*ars*), which has opened up this historical area of interest to a precise set of practices known as the *fine arts*. This schism has

2 We do not intend to problematize the ontology of things in everyday life, but we assume that like any limited portion of matter, they possess a body that could come into sensuous contact with the human body.

conferred a particular advantage to the philosophy of technology over the debates on design because of the technical aspect behind the production of everyday objects. At the same time, with its focus on the fine arts, aesthetics has prejudiced design practice due to the latter's historically anti-artistic conditions: its link with industry, the unlimited reproducibility of its products, but above all, its concreteness and functionality. As a direct consequence, philosophical aesthetics of the early twentieth century, apart from some sporadic writings,[3] has dismissed the design object as lacking conceptual depth relative to the work of art. For this reason, before this dismissal by philosophical aesthetics, the cognitive sciences (Norman, 1988, 2002, 2005) approached the category of design to investigate the mechanisms of the relationship between design objects and their users, highlighting how the communicative and emotional functions play a fundamental role in consumption.

We can summarize by saying that at a meta-theoretical level, contemporary philosophy has explored the merits of design mainly within a technological (see, e.g., Verbeek, 2005; Vermaas, 2008; Houkes & Vermaas, 2010; Galle & Kroes, 2014) rather than an aesthetic model. The aesthetic perspective has here been assigned a secondary role due to a simplified understanding of its theoretical potential for design. The aesthetic in design theory, which is often reduced to a measure of how appealing a product appears,[4] feeds fears that the same discourse will be directed toward the illusionistic space of marketing and advertising: in other words, toward the phenomenon of aestheticization. Recently, however, scholars in the field have realized that the spectrum of aesthetic influence is not limited to formal refinement and taste. Instead, aesthetic theory can assess how design shapes the world, validating that its aesthetic impact reaches further than institutional art renders possible. Design is, as has been suggested by John Heskett, "an essential determinant of the quality of human life" (Heskett, 2002, p. 4).

The recent debate around everyday life (so-called *everyday aesthetics*) provided a fundamental contribution to shifting aesthetics from art toward the object of use and the analysis of its mundane aesthetic impact (see, e.g., Saito, 2007, 2017; Naukkarinen, 2017). More generally, everyday aesthetics focuses on traditionally overlooked areas of life (such as food, fashion, gender, or aging, to name just a few) and researches these phenomena from the viewpoint of their regularity and relational character with respect to the everyday (Naukkarinen, 2013; Melchionne, 2013).[5] It is worth mentioning two cases from the recent literature that focus specifically on the relationship between design and everyday life: Daniel Martin Feige's *Design* (2018) and Jane Forsey's *The Aesthetics of Design* (2013). Both proposals highlight the aesthetic aspects of the performance of daily practices and objects' functionality but assign them different roles in their respective theories.

According to the recent hypothesis put forward by Feige, functionality should be recognized as the aesthetic form of design objects and should become an aesthetic category in its own right. Such a form of aestheticity is embedded in the processes of quotidian interaction with objects. In contrast with the contemplative attitude attributed to the experience of works of art and nature,

3 We have here in mind a series of articles investigating the mysteriousness lying behind the object of everyday use by Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch, Martin Heidegger, and Theodor W. Adorno, collected for the first time by Andrea Pinotti (in their Italian translation) under the title of *La questione della brocca* (The question of the pitcher). It is hazardous here to talk about design as we understand it today. Still, it is undeniable that these writings have left a legacy of inquiry on which we draw today precisely to explain the phenomenon of design.

4 As Folkmann notes, "the pervasive attention paid to aesthetics can be annoying to designers, as it implies that they work solely with artistic matters of surface, appearance, and styling as opposed to, for example, functionality" (Folkmann, 2010, p. 40). This confirms the general tendency to equate the aesthetic with the artistic and, consequently, to find the aesthetic and the functional incompatible.

5 In this paper, we adopt the relation-oriented account of the everyday: it sees the everyday as a relational feature, which entails that any object or event can become ordinary and part of the everyday. This account treats the everyday as a relational concept that refers to the relation between the subject and her environment (see Highmore, 2011).

this practical form (*Praxisformen*) stands out as the aesthetic peculiarity of design objects. As Feige observed, "Design objects are aesthetic objects in that they are each singular embodiment of functions" (2020, p. 59).[6]

An alternative perspective is offered by Forsey, who draws attention to the traditional category of the beautiful against the backdrop of Martin Heidegger's notorious *tool analysis*. According to the Heideggerian framework, in the horizon of our experience, the object of everyday use is apprehended in two modalities: disguised and transparent in its function or striking and noticeable in its malfunction.[7] Forsey rejects Heidegger's approach and claims that "it is not only when they break down that [tools, design objects] come to our attention" (Forsey, 2013, p. 241), noting that they also become conspicuous when they perform their function excellently. She holds that

> *[the design object's] beauty comes to light only through everyday use, and only when it succeeds in performing its function to a degree that merits our approbation*" (p. 242).

By engaging with the Kantian tradition,[8] Forsey maintains an understanding of pleasure prompted by beauty as a purely intellectual pleasure. Feige also considers the aesthetic as purely mental and defines it as "a special exercise of our conceptual faculties that make us the living beings that we are" (Feige, 2020, p. 58).[9] In other words, both philosophers belong to the school of thought that does not consider hedonic pleasure to be aesthetic; therefore, within *this* framework, we are left with no clue about the aestheticity of such sensual experience.

Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics presents a viable alternative. It provides a more holistic theoretical approach to the "aesthetic," reintegrating the original meaning expressed by the Greek term *aisthesis*—sensual perception—into the debate. At the same time, with the prefix "*soma-*," it endorses an embodied intentionality that denies the body/mind dichotomy. Such a theoretical approach consolidates the intellectual with the sensual in "somaesthetic mindfulness."

In the next section, we formulate a set of reasons for asserting that the soma, endowed with sensual intentionality, enters into a direct relationship with the object's body, creating a novel tangible compound object to be appreciated.

3. Being Together: Soma and Design

In this section, we propose a general account of appreciation of the design object through a valuation of the *recipient's soma* and put forward the thesis that what is appreciated is simultaneously the soma, the function, and the object. Far from denying the availability of a critical aesthetic theory applicable to design, we intend to complement it. By paying particular attention to the somatic experience of designs, we might illuminate how we build "the amount of experience and knowledge brought to bear on the [aesthetic] judgement [of designs]" (Forsey, 2013, p. 189). In other words, we believe that somaesthetic sensations and the resulting cognition contribute to our experience of the functional beauty of design, that is, the appreciation of

6 Translation by the authors; emphasis omitted.

7 In Heidegger's theory, tools' mode of being as present—*Vorhandenheit*—is more complex. Tools are revealed to us through un-usability but also through cognition and anxiety (*Angst*).

8 In the debate on the proper methodology of everyday aesthetics, Forsey defends the continuity thesis concerning the aesthetic tradition. For this reason, she refers back to Kant rather than formulating new interpretative notions for the everyday.

9 Translation by the authors.

design objects. The starting point of this proposal is the structure of somatic consciousness as understood by Shusterman.

As we have already mentioned, Shusterman extends the aesthetic experience's conscious aspect to the body intended as "a living, feeling, sentient body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 1). The strength of such an approach is that it allows a theoretical transition from a transcendental subject to an embodied consciousness, which encourages, in turn, the possibility of investigating the inter-corporeality between the user and the design object. This is possible for two reasons. First, this theoretical approach reverses the starting point of the aesthetic analysis, giving body consciousness primacy in the relationship with an object but without losing sight of the object. As Shusterman himself writes, "any acutely attentive somatic self-consciousness will always be conscious of more than the body itself" (p. 8).[10] Secondly, in line with the phenomenological tradition and the thoughts of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Shusterman considers the sensation of one's body as that experience which highlights the fundamental ambiguity of human beings, who not only *have* a body but *are* that same body. The body then emerges not only as "the transparent source of [our] perception or action" but also as "an object of exploration, . . . an object of awareness, . . . as something that I *have* and *use*" (p. 3). Acknowledging this ambiguity leads us to see how we are both subjects experiencing the world and, at the same time, can perceive our body instrumentally[11] as an object in this world. More generally, we experience our body as part of the world, and we experience that part of the world that we act upon. For example, we experience our body as sitting and the armchair we sit upon.

In the scheme of the aesthetic experience of design, we can now introduce the third element of the compound: the function. In most theories, functionality is understood strictly as the identifying criterion of *kinds* of objects: e.g., those with proper function (Parsons & Carlson, 2008) or intentional function (Forsey, 2013). However, the notion of functionality countenances the aesthetic theory of design to explore the practical aspect of interacting with the world more generally. For instance, in comparing her coffee pot to that of her friend Bill, Forsey provides the following reasons to justify appreciating a Bialetti more than an Alessi coffee pot. We believe these are compelling somaesthetic reasons not strictly related to the proper function:

> *his coffee-pot, I want to claim, has flaws that are hidden behind that newness and shine, that detract from its beauty. First, brass conducts heat, and each time you reach for the handle, or put your finger on the lid, you burn yourself. Bakelite remains cool. Second, the sleek rounded design makes it very hard to unscrew the two halves, especially if you already have soapy hands. My octagonal pot turns as easily as a nut in a wrench, whether wet or dry. Third, the conical shape of his means the opening of the top pot is too narrow to fit even a small hand in to clean it, whereas mine, as wide at the top as at the bottom, welcomes a quick scrub. These are perhaps minor quibbles: both pots make very good coffee and both perhaps do it equally well (if I hesitate here it is, I am sure, out of prejudice alone that I prefer mine). And his is, admittedly, better looking* (Forsey, 2013, pp. 181–182).

10 Emphasis omitted.

11 It is not our intention to argue for or against such objectification of the body. We simply acknowledge that this instrumentalization occurs daily, for example, when we look in the mirror or take care of our body.

From our perspective, the "minor quibbles" Forsey mentions assume primary importance. First of all, they introduce a range of possible interactions with the object not limited to its proper function (in this case, "making coffee"). Secondly, these minor criticisms call attention to the somaesthetic dimension of the interaction. Many of us are acquainted with the somatic sensations of impotence in the face of contact burns or a stubborn jar of jam. These are somatic perceptions that, after settling in our memory, inform the value of our judgment. If we do not consider all of these aesthetic factors as deserving our attention, we will end up getting our coffee at a coffee shop even if our Alessi makes excellent coffee. From a somaesthetic perspective, the ease/difficulty of use described acquires the characteristics we would attribute to comfort/discomfort in the sense of the object's contribution to our pleasure ("The object is comfortable").[12] Eventually, if cleaning that coffee pot is more of a nuisance than tasting its delicious coffee, we will abandon the coffee pot at the back of the shelf.

Another critical point to consider is the subject using the coffee pot. In this case, ease of use acquires the characteristics of an eased state of being ("I am comfortable"). In other words, the "minor quibbles" refer not only to something about the object but also something about the subject, about her state, which influences the appreciation/aversion toward interaction with particular objects.

We can try to analyze a more immediate interaction: imagine you are sitting in an armchair. In a comfortable position, the attitude of the body and its parts produces an intimate joy through the distribution of muscle tone. Technically, we say that the chair allows you to sit comfortably, but, as we have seen, comfort does not solely depend on the armchair but also on the body that occupies it. The same armchair can appear extremely uncomfortable to us if, for example, we have back pain. This is to say that such a negatively tinged experience does not exclusively depend on design errors that may emerge from using a given object. If we find it uncomfortable to sit in the armchair because we have back pain, we would not claim that the object is not performing its function well. Indeed, we might resolve this pain by adding a pillow between the lower back and the backrest. In other words, we regularly monitor and adjust our bodies to maximize comfort in a given situation, where bodily comfort is intended as a somatic state of being that is contextual, local, and situated in space and time and, as such, might change over the course of a lifespan.

We might look, for example, at the aesthetic explanations we give ourselves. After sitting, we might claim that the seat is too hard. The hardness of the seat, nevertheless, is not an absolute property of the armchair itself. The denotation "too hard" emerges from the relationship between one's own body and the armchair. The same armchair might feel too soft for someone with a different bodyweight than ours, and even for ourselves 20 kilos ago. To stay on the same line of reasoning, we can ask ourselves if we achieve the same level of appreciation as would the children we once were or the seniors we will become.

Moreover, countenancing somatic experience from the overall interaction with designs (including appreciation) allows us to personalize our encounters with these objects. We are surrounded by objects that are hardly distinguishable from each other: we use the same-looking smartphones, cars, kitchen utensils, tables, lamps, or armchairs, to name just a few. The only thing that genuinely makes our interactions with them special and unique is our bodily response to them. For example, everyone has their particular way of sitting relative to their somatic subjectivity. As we have already noted, our relation with these objects (and assessment of them)

12 In a recent article, Mark Tschaepe (2021) outlines the various ways in which the idea of comfort is perceived in everyday discourse, referring to both the phenomenological and somaesthetic spheres.

is not temporally fixed: I like sitting in my armchair, being that I am about 34 years old and weigh 63 kg, but this might (and probably will) change as I age and experience other changes. What is changing here is not only the object in itself but also, and most importantly, my body and the relation I have with it.

The question is now this: Do we still appreciate the armchair, or is it that we appreciate ourselves sitting in the armchair? Or, do we appreciate a compound consisting of two bodies held together by a relation (sitting)?[13]

To capture all these elements of the experience of human interactions with objects, we put forward the notion of "place." This proposal is intended to shift the aesthetic attention from the identification of isolated objects to the object in association with its user, thus defining the smallest unit of *place* the user can experience as larger than the body alone. In other words, the category of place can designate what we intend by the compound of object and body involved in quotidian and familiar situations. It should be added that the binomial of place and familiarity draws upon Arto Haapala's (2005) existential characterization of quotidian experiences and mundane objects in terms of familiarity bound to the notion of place. This binomial conveys how, by interacting with objects and getting acquainted with them in our day-to-day lived dimensions, we make the surrounding environment our own place (Haapala, 2005, p. 45). This lived "placement" always starts with familiarization with simple elements, such as objects,[14] and expands to larger-scale environments, such as rooms, buildings, cities, and regions.

We would like to point out that what we are describing should not be understood as an extension of our body via the object like, for example, an armchair, but rather as bodily responsibility (and response-ability) toward the armchair. While we often think of our favorite armchair as the one upon which our traces are imprinted, we can think as well of sitting on that particular armchair as shaping our body, leaving its impression through bodily sensation. This double sedimentation of impressions creates a situation of use in which the two polarities do not imply division: the armchair is an object to sit *together with*. That is to say, our body and the body of the armchair are separate entities, yet, when we sit on it, we enter into a somatic relation with it; this tangle becomes a complex object of aesthetic appreciation. During use, objects can be appreciated as an integral part of an intimate situation with our body, which can be pleasant or unpleasant.

In our opinion, an example of such a somaesthetic stance in design was put into practice by the University of the Arts students in Poznań (Poland), who developed an age simulator imitating physical limitations related to old age. This tool helps young designers, by allowing them to literally walk in seniors' shoes and identify with an older body, to familiarize themselves with somatic limitations that they would not consider if they used their own body as a reference point for the project. This case allows us to see how designers direct their attention to an object in use *and* their somatic response to understand and assimilate the old age somatic experience. In other words, to aesthetically experience the bodily discomfort that comes with old age, the attention must be directed to the compound. These experiences, in turn, become valuable know-how and, as Mark Tschaepe has suggested, "have the potential for contributing to moral imagination and tools that foster empathy in others" (Tschaepe, 2021, p. 1).

13 This function is relational in nature since it consists of at least two components: the human body and the body of the design object.

14 For modern digital nomads, whom we can define by their locational independence and lack of a fixed place, we could identify the sense of familiarity advocated by Haapala in their relationship with, for example, their laptop, as that relationship that creates the smallest unit of place.

4. Objections and Replies

As we have seen, Kantian theory and somaesthetics differ in that the former, assuming a mind-body distinction, considers the aesthetic as predominantly psychological. Kant's distrust of sensible experience is well known from the *Critique of Judgment*, where he declares that "in order for me to say that an object is *beautiful*, and to prove that I have taste, what matters is what I do with this presentation within myself, and not the [respect] in which I depend on the object's existence" (Kant, 1987, p. 46).

Along these same lines is the charge Jane Forsey leveled at Arto Haapala's idea of the familiar as the condition for everyday aesthetics, namely, that it lacks aesthetic significance. She traces this deficiency in the examples of quiet and familiar experiences provided by Haapala. While they should act as guarantors of the aestheticity of the everyday, they instead highlight a confusion and conflation of aesthetic and bodily pleasure (Forsey, 2013, p. 233). As we recall, for Forsey, and, in general, for all judgment-based theories, the aesthetic pertains exclusively to the psychological sphere. However, this criticism loses its validity within the framework proposed by somaesthetics since its fundamental principle is the rejection of the mind-body dualism that underlies most of the Western aesthetic tradition.

Somaesthetics does not discriminate between bodily and intellectual pleasure, giving ample space to the perceptual present that involves "not only the more familiar teleceptors or five traditional senses, but also more distinctively bodily senses such as those of proprioception and kinesthesia" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 116), the latter referring to an awareness of one's position in the world. However, we can draw a parallel between Kantian theory and somaesthetics. Both are "phenomenological" investigations that acknowledge the aesthetic mainly as humans' response to the world. In other words, both theories involve an *attentive* aesthetic attitude as the standard feature of the aesthetic experience even if they involve the subject in diametrically opposing ways: disinterestedly in Kant and somatically entangled in somaesthetics.

Forsey says: "Form and function are symbiotically related in our judgements of design, and both contribute to a given object's beauty" (2013, p. 184). We can reinforce this claim by adding that form and function are symbiotically related because they are related in reference to the soma. Better still, the soma becomes the criterion for establishing a fruitful symbiosis between form and function since when we aesthetically appreciate certain design objects, we also evaluate our body as using and responding to these objects. An example clarifying this position is the difference between sleeping in a single versus king-size bed. Although these objects are both beds and, let us say, even very similar in appearance, the qualification we will assign to our sleep will depend primarily on the somatic relation afforded by the given bed. If we are used to sleeping in the starfish position, we will not appreciate sleeping in a single bed, which will expose us to unrest. In other words, it is precisely because our attention is directed to the conglomerate that we can evaluate concrete activities with concrete objects.

It is essential to remember that despite being characterized by a rich and complex perceptual involvement, the somatic subject can also experience itself as an object. In other words, to deploy the notion of soma as an experiential unit of bodily and mental pleasure does not imply flattening the distinction between perception and awareness of this perception. We can still talk of object-oriented appreciation because the attention is directed toward the objective dimension of the soma according to the precept: "I thus both *am* body and *have* a body" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 3).

Continuing with the list of potential criticisms stemming from "purely aesthetic" theories, one might argue that our proposal lacks universal validity and that in the absence of this fundamental criterion, we cannot speak of proper aesthetic appreciation. As mentioned above, these remarks, seen from the somaesthetic perspective, have less force. First of all, from our point of view, appreciating design is not a question of recognizing what everyone likes but what makes us feel good. However, in the specific case of the compound, we can argue that rather than referring to a shared understanding between individuals, we can instead refer to an inter-corporeal (between soma and object) validity that only our well-being can (intersubjectively) confirm. However, disagreements about design arise that we believe are based on the somaesthetic experiences that comprise the instrumentalized subjective element, which is inaccessible to others. We can also see how such disagreement works in reverse: if we disagree with someone about the experience of sitting in a particular chair, we have probably generalized their judgment without considering the other person as part of the compound rather than ourselves. In the end, we do not dispute that it is challenging to discuss somatic experiences theoretically; however, it seems difficult to deny that we ourselves are the experts on our somatic responses.

5. Conclusions

Forsey, among others, has shown, against the prevailing post-Kantian tradition, that there is no point in maintaining beauty's independence from functionality. This provided the outlines of a systematized aesthetic theory of design that is normatively grounded in the situated knowledge of an experiencing subject. For its part, somaesthetics, intending the soma as a privileged place for appreciating aesthetic sensations, allows a pragmatic turn in the aesthetic theory of design. This turn configures the aesthetic potential of design objects on the user's side and allows for clarifying the local conditions of experience, which builds the normative grounds for aesthetic judgments of design objects.

We have brought to the reader's attention that by their nature, everyday objects are designed to serve a function. In their use, our body is often involved. Fashion is the clear exemplification of this somaesthetic relationship. However, as with fashion, this relationship can be seen as frivolous self-care and discarded as mere aestheticization. To the contrary, from a somaesthetic perspective, appreciating design implies a responsibility toward oneself, that is, a call to be responsive toward what one's body feels and go beyond the mere visual appearance of objects. In fact, the experiencing subjects delineated by this approach are able to pass judgment on the practical success of objects *and* are aware of which artifacts improve the conditions of their life. They are (broadly speaking) responsible consumers. Consequently, the so-called "user" (as, for example, in user-centered design methodology) ceases to be perceived as a sort of corporeal statistic. If such an approach were incorporated into design theory and practice, it could reveal unconventional challenges in setting novel standards of use and functional improvements; however, above all, it would extend the scope of design aesthetics beyond formal concerns or visual appeal.

Moreover, our proposal distances itself from questions of how formal and aesthetic properties affect the use of products from an ergonomic perspective, which provides quantified generalizations, and instead embraces how two bodies enter into relationships and the aesthetic (qualitative tone of the) experience that emerges from this encounter. Such an approach, characterized by reference to a complete and intimate interconnection between bodies, is about not only usage but also the way we feel and think during usage.

With this article, we have provided an alternative reading of the aesthetic dimension of product design; what is at issue is a mode of aesthetic response to the body of objects by means of somatic contact. By emphasizing the decisive difference between an object-based and place-based aesthetic experience of design objects, we provide a novel framework for further analysis. Future research could assess whether this notion of the compound as a place can be analyzed in architectural terms[15] or even through the categories of ambiance and atmosphere proposed by Gernot Böhme (1993). For our part, we have shown that if aesthetic appreciation is addressed neither to the object nor to the soma but to the compound of object and soma, a prolific perspective opens up. On the one hand, the object's body does not disappear from the perceptual horizon but rather co-constitutes the aesthetic experience; on the other, the soma benefits from participation with the external environment and the constellation of material objects that compose it.

As we have seen, the operational modalities of a somaesthetic approach might be limiting for an aesthetic theory that aspires to a universal normativity of its precepts; however, they underline the physiological limits of the human[16] that are fundamental for the appreciation of design objects, which, for their part, are conceived precisely to overcome such limitations. This aspect remains fundamental for an aesthetic theory of design that considers the anthropological foundations of design practice and the user experience as critical factors for the discipline.

In conclusion, we would like to remind the reader that our thesis about the aesthetic appreciation of design is *not* a universal one in nature. That is, we have tried to show that at least with certain objects of design, it is plausible and potentially fruitful to think of their aesthetic appreciation as not solely related to their form and function. In other words, we claim that the somatic aspect of design might contribute to our understanding of design, but we do not claim that we always have to pay attention to this aspect: sometimes, we approach objects in a purely disinterested way. Design is often enhanced in this way, for example, in advertising, shop windows, or museums, where objects are placed on pedestals to be appreciated from a distance.[17]

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15 Ritu Bhatt (2013) has edited a collection of essays on the philosophy of embodied aesthetics, investigating the role of the body in architectural design.

16 There is a long anthropological tradition that sees the human being as a deficient being. For example, Ref. Gehlen, A. (1988). *Man, his nature and place in the world.* New York: Columbia University Press.

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