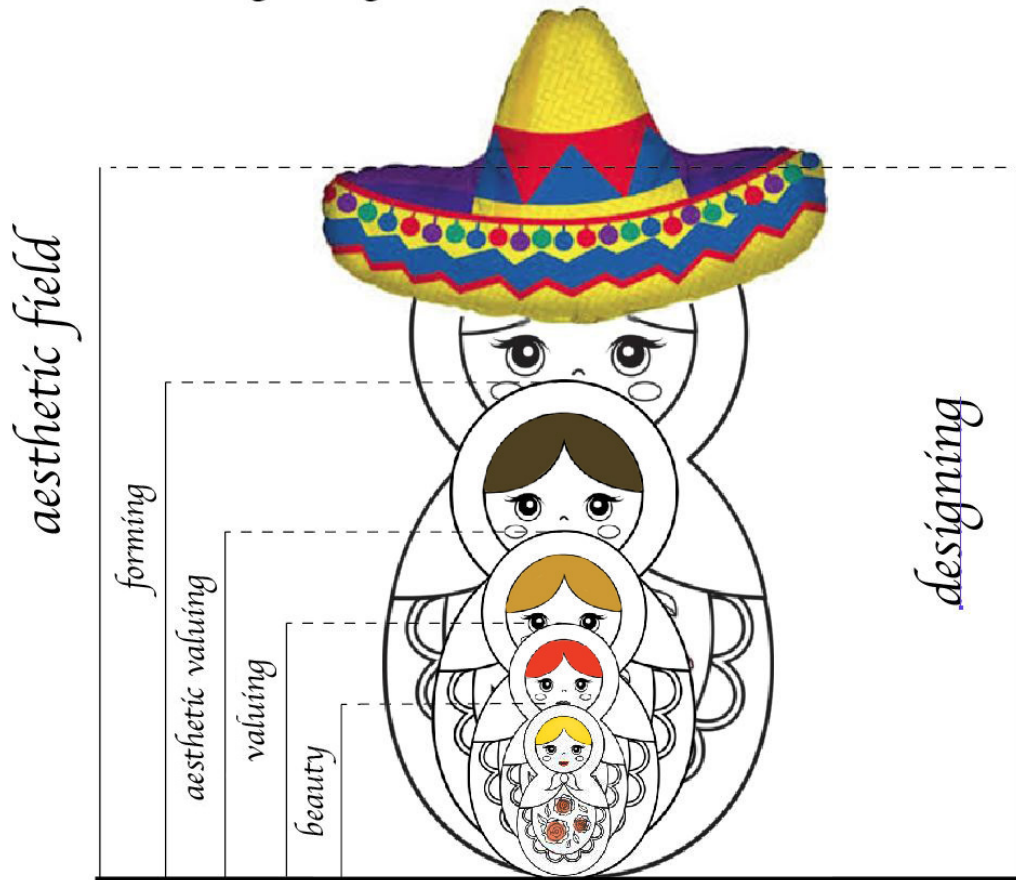


Designing in an Aesthetic Field



The Anatomy of an Ontology

Designing is at its heart an axiological human process. Like all other human processes it can be studied scientifically, and even though its products are most often highly dependent on technical, industrial and craft knowledge for their development and realization, at its core designing's home place is in an ontology of valuing and meaning. The assumption here is that there are different ontologies that correspond to different interests we have in engaging with the world (Rorty) and that they add, blend and integrate in designing.

This essay models an "anatomy" of five key concepts drawn from classical and modern aesthetics to better understand valuing and meaning as a fundamental way of being human in the world. Taken together, these concepts - the poet Goethe called them mental organs - construct a cognitive frame, a model that brings the insight of a conceptual system to an important and often misunderstood aspect of designing. "By 'frame' is meant any concept (designing) that can only be better understood if a larger system of concepts (the model) is also understood." (Lakeoff)

The view presented is that valuing and meaning is a way of being in the world that begs such first questions as “what matters?” and “what needs doing, changing or inventing?” and that the central product of designing – the common thread that runs through better policies, better places, better systems, preferred actions and artifacts of all kinds – is the cultural construction of meaning.

Philosophical aesthetics is a legacy source with much insight to offer an ontology that is often shoved under the bus in the press to improve performance and accountability in designing. The assertion here is that designing is made whole through this understanding.

The matryoska model, then, offers up and organizes important concepts from aesthetic thought. An evolutionary model of beauty, understood through such concepts as idealized category structure and prototype theory, sits at the model’s core, giving the lie to the misconception that beauty is nothing more than a pretty face. The organizing principle of the framing is an aesthetic field.

The concept of an aesthetic field comes initially and is developed from the writings of philosopher Arnold Berleant - that of beauty from St. Thomas Aquinas. The concept of valuing is described as a logical extension of the perceptual and environmental structure of beauty. Valuing is represented as taking place in human perception in an aesthetic field, a place where qualitative things come together as qualia and the truth of valuing is revealed.

With valuing comes a common and familiar vocabulary for describing the conceptual unity of perceptual objects and interests in environment. Valuing provides a conceptual structure and needed language for the categorizing of transitive human interests, needs, wants and desires. Like the sentence, valuing is a unity of both subjects and their objects and objects and their subjects, a unity in process. The focus turns then to aesthetic valuing and its three faces: as its own unique and special kind of interest; as a supporting and reifying process for all other values; and as the conceptual site for the construction of the meaning of qualitative wholes.

The conceptual unity of the ontology, as it is discussed here, is completed in the idea of meaning in experience, which is always present as valuing’s constant measure. Significant interests matter. Meaning is both a constant and a summary experience. Mathematically expressed, valuing \times meaning = 1, with each being the reciprocal of the other. And philosophically, the notation is $\{V / M\}$, the concept being two-faced like the Roman god Janus, or $\{\text{wave/particle}\}$ in physics.

The historically central concept of forming in designing is here conceptualized environmentally as a co-evolutionary valuing process that purposefully seeks meaning in situational transformation. But designing is more than forming and is described as situated in and conditioned by an aesthetic field. The aesthetic field is

proposed as the primary arbiter of the quality of representational construction in perception and the artifacts of cultural production.

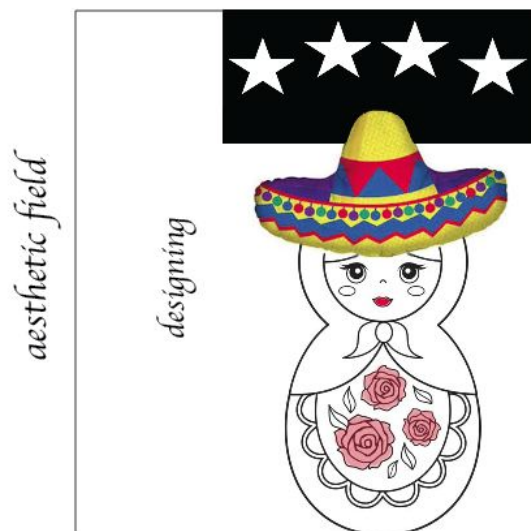
Each of the Matryoska concepts is further developed, diagramed and explained below. The point of the model is that designing takes place in, and its deeper meaning is to be drawn from, the interdependence of these five concepts.

It has become easy to forget that an ontology of reasoning and empirical science is a relatively recent newcomer in the long and evolving process of being conscious in the world. The object here, of course, is not to throw out Diderot's encyclopedia and all it stood for, but to show how important it is to join such knowledge with qualitative experience and imagination in a larger qualitative project.

And to put a cap on it is this poetic observation from Wallace Stevens' number six of his Six Significant Landscapes:

VI
 Rationalists, wearing square hats,
 Think, in square rooms,
 Looking at the floor,
 Looking at the ceiling.
 They confine themselves
 To right-angled triangles.
 If they tried rhomboids,
 Cones, waving lines, ellipses --
 As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon --
 Rationalists would wear sombreros.

I. Aesthetic Field



“We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”
Oscar Wilde

There is certainly more than one way of looking at a thing. “The physical limits of an object are not its experiential limits,” writes philosopher Arnold Berleant. There is a wider world of relationships than the scientific interest in the structure and function of things. In the long history of human evolution and culture, the modern emphasis on how things are and how they work, while undoubtedly instrumental, purposefully ignores much of what matters in human experience.

The experience of human perception, the awareness of being in place in the world is the longer, wider view. And it is primary, Berleant explains, quoting Merleau-Ponty, because “the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths and values are constructed *for us*.” (my emphasis)

The view here is that perception is not just a visual act but a somatic engagement, “a unified collaboration of all the senses” in an evolved landscape of consciousness, one that is experienced as valuable and meaningful; that perception is a construction, a construal that includes emotional reactions, associations, memories, and imaginings; and that perceptual experience is deeply biological as well as complexly personal, social and modern.

On this view, perception includes a reading of things and situations as to whether they are harmful or helpful, pleasant or painful, symbolic or metaphoric. It is about what things connote as well as what they denote. It involves introspection and interpretations of what an experience means and how best to represent it and communicate it to others. The tropes, such as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, are not mere flowery expressions but fundamental ways of imaginatively regarding and relating to the world. (Lakoff et al)

Perception also involves an evaluation of situations that leads to projections of ways in which things might be made different, more useful, fitting or better. It involves a determination of what if anything needs doing, what actions need taking, what needs making or transforming. Ontologically, environmental perception does not emanate from a centering in reason. A modern blend of ontologies overlays knowing and suffuses it into evolutionary layers of felt-preference, consideration and choice.

Perception takes place as a perceptual field experience of both sense and sensibility, one that integrates animal needs, wants, desires and raw emotions from the dawn of human culture with an up-to-date brain capacity for reason, judgment, imagination, empathy, intellectual appreciation and delight.

Human perception is not about environment. It is not surrounded by it. It is *of* environment. Perception is integral and continuous with environment.

Perception is human consciousness engaged in a co-evolutionary, reciprocal environmental whole. “Environment includes the participant as an integral part.” (Berliant)

The Merleau-Ponty view that “the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths and values are constructed *for us*” however misses a central point, which is that it is the biosocially conscious *we, who are doing the construction, we who are bringing our experience, “the repertoire of who we are” to that construction.*

We pay attention to the things that matter, situations that we care about, those that we need to care about, and those that we want to and prefer to care about. It is this valuing nature of human perception that focuses human attention, animates the construction and evaluation of environmental experience and that sets the stage for the formative work of designing.

The Meta-Aesthetics of an Aesthetic Field

Environmental experience is qualitative in four key ways. It is qualitative in its boundaries, in its representations, in its state, and in its meaning, all of which importantly influence design thinking and designing.

Boundaries: In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey describes the fuzzy boundary that exists between experience generally and “an experience.” The difference is the conscious creation of identities. An experience that is “an experience” is a perceived identity of unity, wholeness and completeness. Unity, wholeness and completeness are meta-aesthetic judgments of an overall qualitiveness. It is this evaluative engagement in environment at the meta-aesthetic level of experience that is the unique and governing principle of an aesthetic field.

A parallel kind of evaluation of identity takes place for situations in designing. The boundaries of situations are equally dependent on perceptually driven interests and interpretation. The practice of designing involves the choosing and construction of place-time identities that attempt to establish a locus of potential transformational influence, impact and change. This process of evaluation, choice and construction of strategic identity structures of situations in designing is an exercise in meta-aesthetic judgment.

Choices with regard to such qualitative meta-evaluations as unity, identity, and wholeness must inevitably reflect the shortcomings and imperfections of conscious perception, one of which is the tendency to be able to represent only what one is prepared to see or understand. Another is the inability in situations to be able to accurately forecast the actual ripples of transformational consequence.

The aesthetic of setting boundaries in design practice has its own practical history. The architect Eliel Saarinen's advice to his architect son Eero was to always remember to try to think in the next larger and next smaller scale. Aristotle's more general context and boundary belief was that, "It is the mark of the educated man and proof of his culture that in every subject he looks for only so much precision as its nature permits."

Representation: The first requirement is to accept that the perception of being in environment is a representation and not the thing itself. Being human in environment means being actively immersed and engaged in an immensely complex construction of symbolic representation. The important distinction to be made here is that representational needs of an ontology of valuing and meaning differ qualitatively from those of an ontology of objective knowing. In the former, valuing expressions involving interests, desires, beliefs and possibilities are critical and wanted. In the latter, they just get in the way.

Typically, situations in designing are focal environments that have become ripe for change. Some degree of transformation is wanted, needed and desired. Something needs doing, discovering, inventing. Situational representation is a social process that attempts to construct a conscious understanding of the need for that change, how it has come about, and what is wanted that would satisfactorily resolve the situation. Design situations create storied representations of qualitative differences that point toward desired outcomes.

The narratives (or briefs, or programs) constructed are both descriptive and prescriptive. They attempt to record and prioritize the biosocial needs, wants, hopes and dreams of a specific social group situated in time and place, the kinds and forms of information needed and the processes of working through a situation and deciding. The decision-making in transformational situations is political and more politically complex the more people it involves. Deciding how to decide is part of the designing.

The meta-aesthetic here is construal and representational excellence, the relative goodness and the usefulness of the socially constructed narrative. This is a meta-measure of the success at achieving overall acceptance with respect to expressed purpose, project content, situational boundary setting, operating process and procedure, project resources, the adequacy, accuracy and appropriateness of symbolic representations, critical knowledge, imaginative projections, and possible resolutions.

State: Situations in designing are by definition unstable. Present conditions do not fulfill present needs, wants and desires and are tipping toward transformation. Dissonances, discrepancies and deficiencies have led to conditions of dissatisfaction and discord that increase the pressure for change. Such inertias as fear, habit, and tradition that resist change are weighed against desire, need,

enthusiasm, optimism and commitment. Deep yearnings for imagined ideals vie with known forms of improvement, betterment and the most practically achievable.

An accomplished program and resolution to move forward doesn't necessarily mean that all is in accord or that everyone has been open and honest about their interests and concerns. Sandbagging occurs. Competing agendas with differing beliefs and value priorities must inevitably clash and be consciously reconciled.

The meta-aesthetic of the overall state of a transformational situation is the qualitative oversight that is needed to keep the complexly human process of transformation open, imaginative and creative, one that is open to democratic participation, open to heuristic learning and to possibilities, open to the unexpected and unanticipated, and open to the need for and application of critical knowledge. In business it is said that there are two kinds of managers, those that manage the systems they are given and those that manage to bring the new systems that are needed into being.

Meaning: In an ontology of valuing and meaning, valuing and meaning are conceptually one, an identity. Meaning is the face of consciousness in the mirror, the one looking back, reflecting on what it sees. Valuing expresses the interests and inner forces that focus and direct human attention. Meaning takes their measure. Because all interests of all kinds by definition matter. From less to more.

In "An Essay on Meaning in Design Thinking," I wrote that the meta-measures of meaning in designing were significance, satisfaction and success, and that these summarized a semantic that integrated the "*that, how and what*" dimensions of "meaning in experience." In experience, *that* measures significance. *How* measures the aptness and representational quality of expression. And *what* draws from and is constructed out of a wider semantic that includes presentational symbolism (Langer).

The meta-aesthetic of meaning in experience is then the overall measures of significance, satisfaction and success that are both considered and felt. We reach for such words as important, serious, compelling, consequential, momentous, weighty, estimable and appreciable to represent significance.

Insignificant qualitative relationships are evaluated and dismissed as trivial to meaningless. Satisfaction is measured by overall fulfillment, gratification, contentment, relish and pleasure, while dissatisfaction aggregates elements of displeasure, unhappiness and discontent. Success takes the full measure of personal and social accomplishment over time. The meta-aesthetic of significance, satisfaction and success as a whole is further aggregated into the experience of joy and sorrow.

Of course there is a meta-aesthetic of meaning in an ontology of objective knowing, but it differs in a significant way from that of an ontology of valuing and meaning. The former is by definition non-ethical because it is focused on the empirical

measuring of correspondent truths in a directionless natural selection, while the latter is about the goodness and justice of purposeful change in culture.

Designing in the best sense is about the virtuous and purposeful ordering of the co-evolutionary forces of consciousness that can be socially directed and controlled. Its search for goodness resides within an aesthetic field and not the other way around because, as we know, morality can be darkly compromised, while:

"The aesthetic appreciation of the morally good is the finest flower
of humanity. George Santayana

In an aesthetic field, the purposeful thought, processes and actions of designing conflate and conspire with objective knowledge to produce the artifacts of cultural transformation. There is irony here in that it is an ontology of knowing that is needed to uncover, explicate and promote an ontology of valuing and meaning. Appreciation of that irony is meta-aesthetic.

The Gift of Beauty

One of the great gifts of antiquity is Thomas Aquinas' classic definition of beauty: "...pulchrum dicuntur quae visa placent." (Summa Theologica I-a IIae, q.27) translated as:

"Let that be called beauty the very perception of which pleases."

Unpacking the Aquinas perspective of this universal human experience opens a conceptual gateway into the important family relationship between, valuing, aesthetic experience, designing and an aesthetic field.

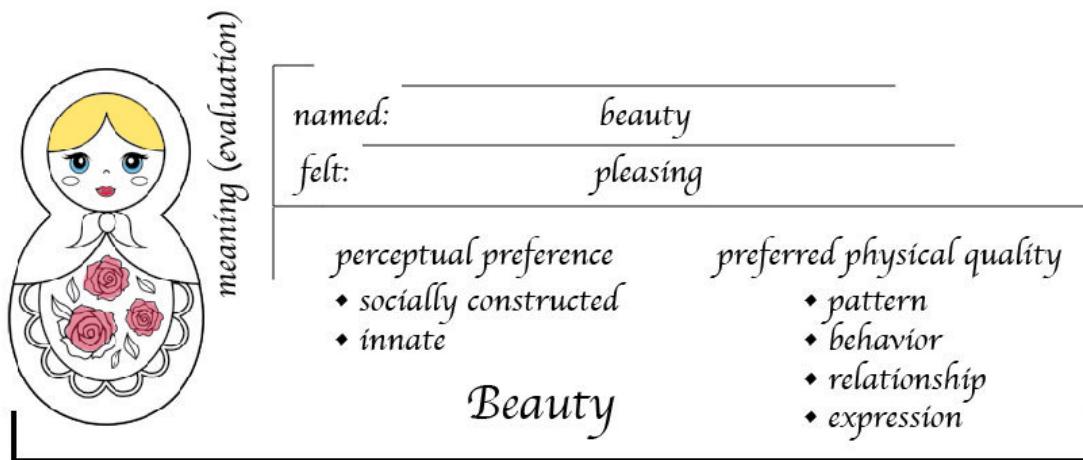
This 13th century description is surprisingly environmental and perceptually non-dualistic. It brings together and compares stored mental ideals of the beautiful with instances of environmental perception. The very fact of the immediacy of the evaluation suggests a direct correspondence with previously stored conceptions and their representations. And that re-cognition is reified in human thinking as the feeling of pleasure.

What, then, are those stored conceptions of the beautiful and where do they come from? Taking a biosocial and co-evolutionary perspective, we can say that perceptual beauty must be, at least in part, a conditioned response to the socially constructed and everyday preferable norms, trends, fashions and standards of one's time, place and group. As for example today's "world of Ralph Lauren."

The deeper layers of the beauty response must then come from the DNA and layers of the evolutionary brain and its preferential and pleasurable links to such evolutionary fundamentals as human sexual reproduction, the transmission of

genetic material, and to human fitness in its evolutionary home. In the deepest sense, the pleasure experienced in beauty is special, as in “of the species.” Beauty marks the special.

On this view, beauty isn’t a thing, “pleasure objectified,” or “pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing,” (Santayana) but a general name given to a generic category of pleasurable evaluations in environmental perception. And it is languaging that then digitizes beauty’s analogical spectrum with symbolic markers that create concepts from the nice to the pretty to the sublime in every tongue.



In the diagram above, the model of beauty shows the field in which stored preferences and physical patterns cohere in their immediacy in experience. The emotional evaluation is a kind and intensity of pleasure. Each language sets forth its own culture-bound array of beauty markers and meanings, which interpret a range that reaches “from raw emotion to intellectual delight” (Tuan) with concepts that reach from the nice to organic wholeness.

“The greatest beauty is organic wholeness, the wholeness of life
and things, the divine beauty of the universe. Love that, not man
apart from that...”Robinson Jeffers

Meaning unites both feeling and concept as meaning in experience.

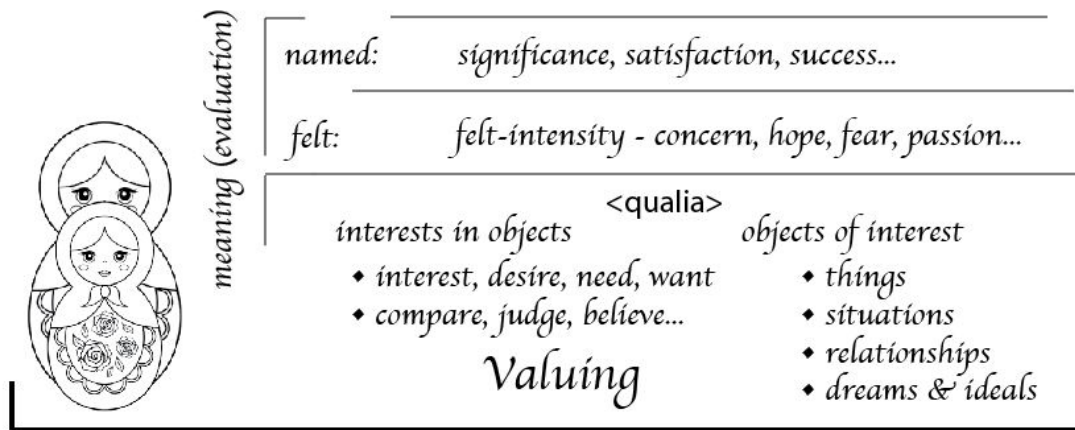
Valuing

Perceptual beauty is the child who models the way to the modern conception of valuing as it has evolved in twentieth century philosophy.

As used here, valuing no longer resembles the dualistic interest in an object or object of interest conception of the early last century (Ralph Barton Perry). And it has stepped past the mid-century sense of valuing as a subject-object configuration or gestalt (Rader and Jessup) to become a model of qualitative experience in a perceptual field.

Stepping from perceptual beauty toward the more general model:

Step: Note how the structure of the perceptual beauty model holds, even as its spectrum is extended to embrace the negative emotions and the darker displeasures and vocabulary of ugly.

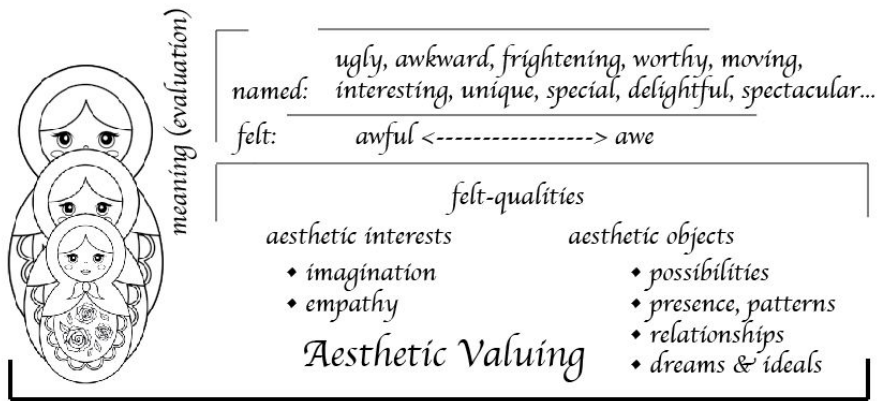


Step: Note too how it holds when perceptual immediacy is extended in time to allow for the deeper and time-depth considerations of an “admirable beauty” (Adler).

Step: Note how this leads to the point where all environmental acts of perception, beholding and contemplation are understood to include all of the senses and are associated with a full spectrum of emotional responses that become cognized in language. Aesthetics is from the Greek, aithesis, meaning literally “perception by the senses.”

Step: Note how the core model then widens beyond its initial focus in perceptual beauty into the more holistic and general perceptual structure of felt-quality in aesthetic valuing.

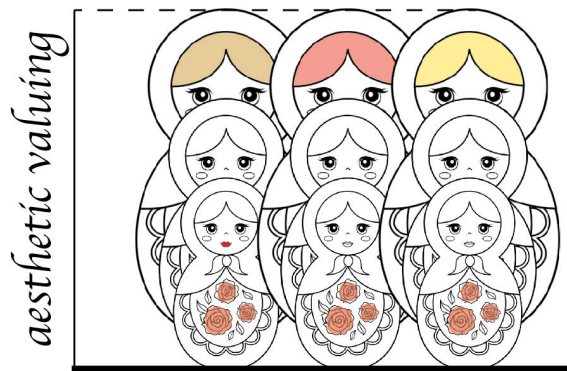
Step: And note how this is further expanded and recognized as a general valuing model for all the kinds and categories of qualitative interests that matter, whose



biosocial mattering is semantically integrated into a meaning in experience.

The Aquinas’ model of beauty is a Matryoska-like miniature, a beautiful instance of conceptual beauty – that steps beyond a structure of perceptual immediacy, evaluation and pleasure to lend its elegant insight into the larger wholes of aesthetic valuing and valuing generally.

Three Faces of Aesthetic Valuing



1. The Thing Itself

There are three ways in which the concept of aesthetic valuing contributes insight into the multivalent complexities of qualitative experience. The first describes aesthetic valuing’s separate and unique contributions. The second the way that aesthetic valuing is bound up in the expression of all the other categories of valuing. And the third is the meta-aesthetic oversight of qualitative wholes, the focus on “overall qualitiveness” (Dewey) that identifies an aesthetic field.

Emmanuel Kant distinguished aesthetic valuing from social, economic, functional and other kinds of valuing by its disinterestedness. He didn't mean uninterested, which is of course a contradiction in terms. He just wanted to consider some of the unique qualities of the thing itself, such as the capacity and delight in pure mental play or spectacle. And he didn't mean disengaged. Far from it.

A mind at play was deeply engaged in the world and would, for example, delight in the following cartoon about palindromes, not because it was useful, but just because it was both visually and associatively amusing. (see below)

Kant wanted be able to distinguish such things as the fascination and positive appreciation of the performance of a villain in a play, while personally believing in socially acceptable norms of behavior. He thought it important to be able to mentally separate the pure pleasure of a work of art from other considerations such as how much something cost or the prestige it might afford to own.



Kant and the many who have followed him typically divided aesthetic value into the separate categories of aesthetic interest and aesthetic object, following the mind-body dualism of their day. Most subsequent literature aligned itself with one or the other of the two camps, the one emphasizing some principle source of the aesthetic in aesthetic interest, and the other concentrating on some *je ne sais quoi* of endowed worthiness to artifacts in an Artworld. It was the modern fusing and conflation of subjective and objective dimensions of aesthetic value into felt-quality that was the catalyst for today's holistic and integrative model of valuing generally.

Schopenhauer believed it was the exciting of imagination that marked the presence of aesthetic experience, and today we see the involvement of that imagination in far more fundamental and useful ways. Out of imagination come: conceptual blending and integration and the metaphoric seeing of one thing in terms of another; the delights and pleasures of playfulness; the projections of the ideal, the desirable and the possible; the capacity to assess the risks and consequences of transformation; the below-the-surface meanings of irony, and the always-surprising emergence of the unanticipated, unexpected and the new.

“Imagination at Work” (General Electric) gives us the making of movies in the mind, the construction of scenarios of possible futures, and the far less costly dress rehearsals of transformations before the fact.

In philosophical aesthetics, the domain of aesthetic interest has long been considered the seat and the source of imagination, sympathy and empathy, the capacity to feel the pain and suffer along with others. Compassion and empathy are charter members of the meta-aesthetic.

2. The Enabler, the Reifier, and The Vivifier

At the same time it is being itself, aesthetic valuing is busily engaged in the enabling, reifying, and vivifying of other qualitative experience. If there is a golden thread in the weave of life, it is aesthetic valuing, which is always deeply involved in how each of the other values show and shine.

Consider for example the symbolic rituals that mark the many different significant passages and occasions of our social life. It is aesthetic valuing that composes their symbolism and underlies the creation of their significant order, presence, dignity and meaning.

It is sometimes easier to understand meaning creation in the intentional occasions of other. Here is an example from the Chinese novel, *Decoded*, by Mai Jia.

In the novel, the protagonist Jinshen is leaving home, and Mrs. Lillie was determined that "this was to be a very special meal."

The "meal had to comprise four important elements:

1. "The main dish was going to be a bowl of noodles, just like the kind that people eat on their birthdays to symbolize many happy returns of the day.
2. "The noodles had to be made of buckwheat. Buckwheat noodles are softer than the ordinary kind. This would symbolize that people have to be more forgiving and flexible when they are among strangers.
3. "The flavorings for this noodle soup should include vinegar, chili peppers and walnuts. Walnuts are bitter. This would symbolize that, of the four flavors, bitterness, sourness and spiciness would be left behind at home; once he left everything would be sweet.
4. "Not too much soup was to be made, because when the time came, Jinzhen was supposed to drink every last drop, to symbolize completeness and success.

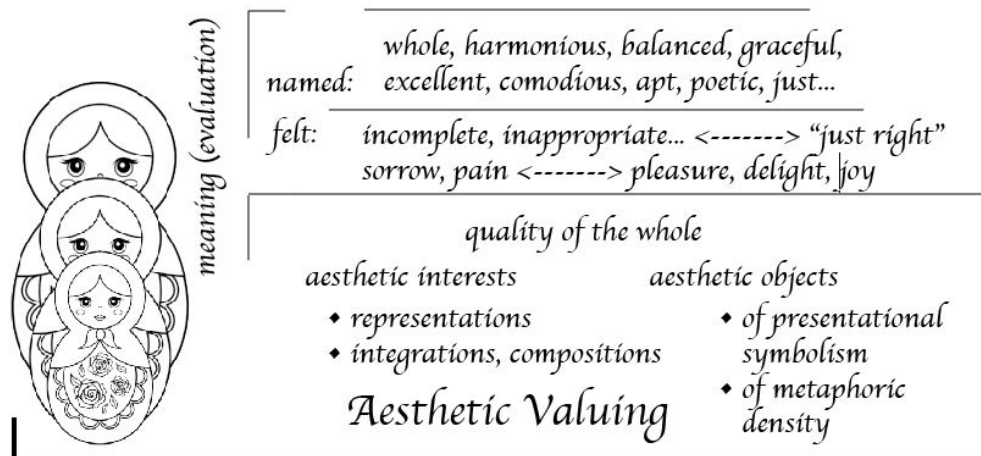
"It was just a bowl of soup, but it represented all the old lady's fondest hopes and wishes for him."

Consider too the aesthetic in such mattering as the appropriate dress for business, the tattoos and piercings of dissent, the sex in salesmanship and consumerism, the vast spectacles and stadia of sport, and the celebrations of the seasons. Consider how sport, season and religious symbolism are all combined each summer in the Piazza del Campo in Sienna when it is time for the ritual of the Palio, a horserace that celebrates the Assumption of Mary with the blessing of its horses in the church and the placing of "la terra in piazza."

3. Taking the Overall Measure of Qualitativeness.

There are great, spectacular and breathtaking performances. There are five-star films and those that somehow fall beneath the firmament. There is Aristotle's Eudaimonia, often translated as the virtuous life or Jefferson's pursuit of happiness, but better understood as "a whole life well lived." There are such measures as excellence, goodness, beauty, harmony, wholeness and justice (sustainability) to be taken in all aspects of life.

In architecture the Vitruvian measures are firmitas, utilitas, and venustas, often translated into English as firmness, commodity and delight. It is venustas, pleasure and delight in the triumvirate that is usually considered as representing the aesthetic. But in this form of aesthetic valuing, the aesthetic appreciation of unity, identity, firmness, stability, endurance and usefulness all belong to and become



measures of the meta-aesthetic.

To the more famous triumvirates: firmness, commodity and delight; harmony, wholeness and beauty; truth, goodness and beauty; integrity, stability and beauty

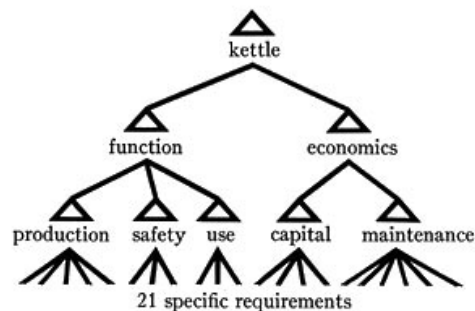
and love, honor and respect (Leopold); I like to contribute the meta-aesthetic measures of apt, poetic and just.

Forming

Form is a root concept in aesthetic philosophy with a long and varied history. It dates from Plato's concept of form as eternal idea to the many emphases on its objective and expressive physicality in the 20th century. Some historic examples are: significant form (Bell); symbolic and expressive form (Langer); form as value embodied and expressed (Reid); and form as an objective correlate of feeling (Eliot). All beg better answers to the questions: significant of what? And expressive of what?

The famous twentieth-century architect Louis Kahn anomalously sided with Plato. To Kahn, form was the idea and designing took its measure. Artist Ben Shawn offered, "Form is the Shape of Content," and Suzanne K. Langer, "Feeling and Form," both uniting and spreading the components of form across a valuing field.

In early Christopher Alexander, form is a rational synthesis of objective factors. Here, for example, is his formative diagram for a kettle in *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. At this stage in Alexander's thinking, form is a rational summation and there was no place in the discussion for such Vitruvian qualities as "firmness, commodity and delight."



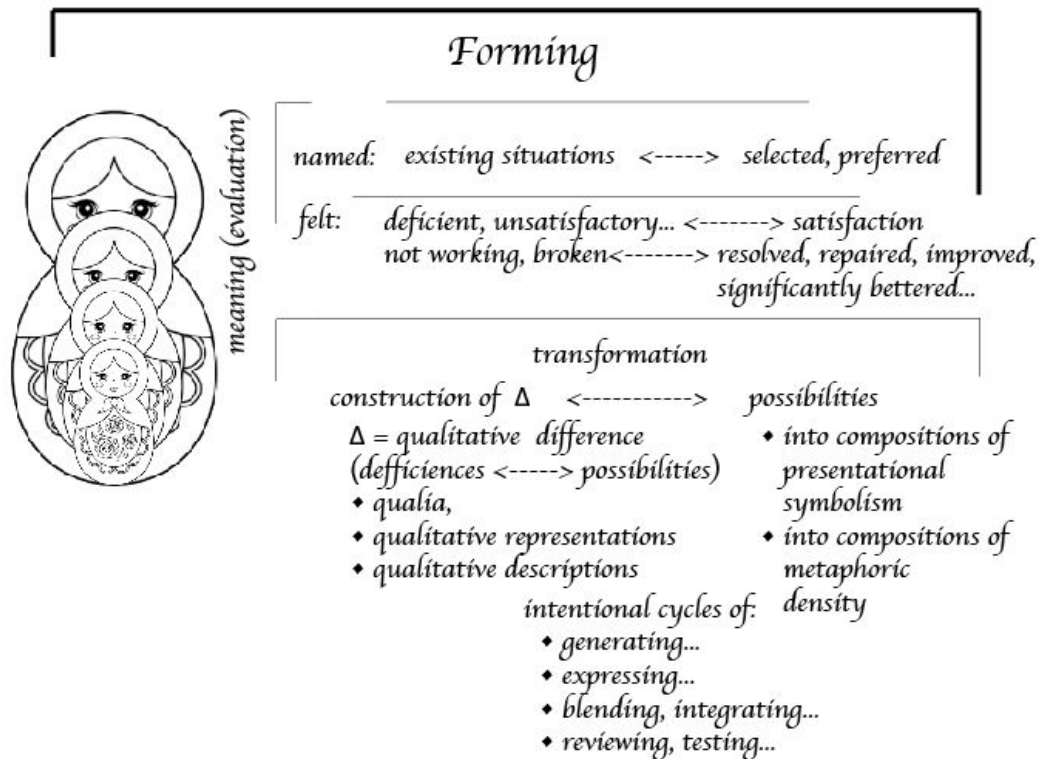
Later in the *Timeless Way of Building* and other writings, his thinking evolves as he attempts to interconnect "patterns," primary qualitative environmental relationships needed to resolve recurring environmental situations, with an overall qualitative evaluation of wholeness called "the quality without a name."

"To Alexander, the goal of good architecture is to achieve a Kabalist-Taoist "quality without a name": buildings, towns, and gardens that make us feel most alive, the most true to ourselves, the most unselfconscious, the most whole, the most complete, the most free."

David Sheen

From the perspective of an early modern rationalist, Alexander had devolved and jumped the shark into an ontology of valuing and meaning. His measures of “the most true, the most unselfconscious, the most whole and the most free,” are all recognizably meta-aesthetic.

Form as it is being modeled here is the co-evolutionary process of forming, expressed as intentional and purposefully directed valuing. Forming takes place, as shown in the diagram below, in an active field of continuous cultural adaptation in environment, where it resolves qualitative differences in human perception and mixes intentional ideas and acts of cultural transformation into an otherwise directionless evolution.



In the model, perceived qualitative differences arise in situations and motivate transformation and change. Qualitative differences are felt as deficiencies with respect to imagined possibilities and preferences. Situational representations and heuristic formative developmental cycles lead to preferred symbolic actions, compositions and meaningful expressions - to the making of soup that is more than just soup.

Designing in an Aesthetic Field

Beauty is the exemplar and core of the model. It's an essential ingredient in a "whole-life-well-lived," one filled to the brim with perceptual, admirable and meta-aesthetic beauty. But it becomes much more when its cognitive structure is revealed as a conceptual gateway that opens out into an ontology of valuing and meaning.



Valuing generates the representational space of qualitative relationships and the vocabulary to discuss the perceptual qualia of beliefs, needs, wants and desires. In an ontology of valuing and meaning, space and time transform into place and occasion, centers of meaning in experience. Forming and designing are congruent conceptual overlays on the conceptual space of a valuing field.

Aesthetic valuing is imagination at both work and play. Imagination parlays the playful conceptual blending and integration that is captured in Oscar Wilde's last words:

"Either this wallpaper goes or I do."

into the far more complex conceptual blendings and integrations that become transformed into compositions of metaphoric materiality and the metaphoric density of formative expressions. Cf. Fauconnier and Turner's, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*, and also Charles Burnett's, "Conceptual Modeling, Imagination and Analysis in Relational Thought."

And imagination is a passport for travel in conceptual space, backward into memory and forward into possibility. Into the surprise that lies waiting beyond goals and expectations. Into "the next room of the dream." (Howard Nemerov)

In number IV. of Wallace Steven's, *Six Significant Landscapes*, the poet takes imagination to the moon:

IV
When my dream was near the moon,
The white folds of its gown

Filled with yellow light.
 The soles of its feet
 Grew red.
 Its hair filled
 With certain blue crystallizations
 From stars,
 Not far off.

And in III, he reaches “right up to the sun,/With my eye;” and “to the shore of the sea /With my ear.”

Aesthetic valuing is the packaging and delivery service for all the other values and the Amazon and Home Depot of metaphoric materiality.

Aesthetic valuing is a recycling of heuristic evaluation and development that leads to satisfaction and “just right.”

Forming consciously resolves perceptions of significant qualitative difference. For a while.

Because situational relationships age and change. Institutions deteriorate and require renewal, remodeling and replacement. Policies end their shelf life. Products and places no longer satisfy. People change their mind about what they want and prefer. Seductive horizons of novelty, newness and change beckon.

And with the waxing and waning of meaning arise new cycles of resolving perceived qualitative difference and fresh constructions of meaning in experience.

Designing adds conscience to the process of conscious forming. Because consciousness is not yet fully conscious, a still ripening fruit on the evolutionary tree, designing importantly superimposes an ethos, the moral ideal and compass of betterment, compassion, justice and beauty to forming. And this ethos is held to the high standards of the meta-aesthetic, the high-consciousness aspirations of an aesthetic field.

The goal of cultural modernism in architecture, wrote Christian Norbert-Shultz in an early essay, was the reuniting of thinking and feeling. That goal lay sleeping in wait of the kiss of an ontology of valuing and meaning.

The Cognitive Semantics of an Aesthetic Field

From the perspective of cognitive semantics, the matryoska model is a *generative category*, a system of concepts that “takes central cases and applies certain principles to designate category membership.”

The central case in both the model and in cognitive semantics generally is the idea that all meaning is conceptual, and that meaning corresponds with a concept held in the mind built from personal understanding and experience. Situations are qualitatively construed and represented perceptions. Perceptual beauty as described by Aquinas opens up a wide conceptual world when viewed in this light.

The coordinating principle in all the concepts is the body-mind-environmental place of experience, the *field*, where both valuing and meaning things and knowing and factual things come together, where contributing ontological truths are blended, integrated, recycled and meaningfully expressed.

If designing is to live up to its potential as a “tool” that aims “to enhance and assist people, organizations, and societies in developing systems and procedures that address major human and societal needs,” (DesignX) it will need to widen its understanding and appreciation of those needs. And these include the culture-shaping forces of believing, desiring, willing, and wanting at the heart of living, human systems as revealed in an ontology of valuing and meaning.

A promising way to begin reducing some of the most serious design omissions in present conceptions of problem solving would seem to be by bringing them under the hat.

“Let be be finale of seem,” and “make it so!”

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