

Design Governs our Behavior

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Design is a ramified field with affinities to as diverse professions as art history, economics, anthropology, technical studies and psychology – and many more. However until recently design history and design theory have almost exclusively been the domain of art historians. For the same reason traditional design research has focused mainly on the stylistic and aesthetic aspects of design while functional issues have not received the same scholarly attention. In my Ph.D. thesis: 'The Form Shapes the Norm. A discussion of Design as a Way of Governing Behavior'¹ I am exploring how designers through their practice anticipate and sanction certain behavior patterns while discouraging others.

My research question is: Does design govern our behavior and if yes how does this influence manifest itself in material structures? Should the critical design researcher look to the intentions of the designer, the object itself or – as anthropologist Bruno Latour suggests – in the network formed by human and non-humans alike. Personally I find the last possibility most promising but find it hard to combine this approach with the form-sensitive sort of analysis that I think is mandatory for research in design.

The PhD project revolves around a rather comprehensive case study of a relatively new prison in Denmark, called Statsfængslet Østjylland. However my thesis is that design influences human behavior in a wide variety of settings ranging from the very subtle to more extreme cases in which design explicitly hinders certain unwanted users or uses. In fact, any design object have been created with certain uses in mind – even the most anonymous cup suggests a way of holding it as well as a way of drinking from it. On the other extreme we find objects made to explicit exclude specific users such as the 'Bum Proof Bench' shown in Mike Davis 'City of Quartz' which have a rounded seat (a bit like a barrel) to prevent homeless people sleeping on it. My claim would be that designers work with supporting or changing behavior patterns all the time but that this important aspect of their work has not received enough attention in design education and design research at large.

Ultimately I want to make designers as well as the users of their designs more aware of the social values that influence the design process and hence the designed

¹ In Danish: 'Formen følger normen. En diskussion af design som adfærdsregulerende praksis'.

environment. These values are not necessarily shared by all users of a space, interior or object and may serve the interest of some user groups more than others. If these interests even shape our understanding of certain situations and therefore influences our behavior patterns then design is potentially a very powerful instrument for those who know how to use it. This power can obviously be put to bad as well as good uses.

In their book *'Nudge. Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness'* legal scholar Cass R. Sunstein and economist Richard Thaler suggest that many people need incentives to help them do what they want to do but can't always get around to doing. They show that by altering small details of a set up it is possible to affect peoples' choices massively. For instance placing the healthy food where it is easily visible will make sales of wholesome foods go up instantly or by using small plates people will actually eat less thereby losing weight. Knowing explicitly about such mechanisms and bringing them to active and reflected uses in their work designers can strengthen their role as one of the most important and influential 'choice architects' of modern society.

As a consequence of the above chain of reasoning I see design as a major and yet largely unexplored tool for changes in everyday habits. Seen this way design can seriously affect such pressing and ultimately political issues as climate (by promoting a green life style), health (making good eating habits easy) and crime issues (making it harder to commit crimes by physical measures). Design is as much about anticipating behavior as about creating attractive things. As such design should be assessed not only in terms of its aesthetic and stylistic merits but also in terms of its moral, political and social consequences.