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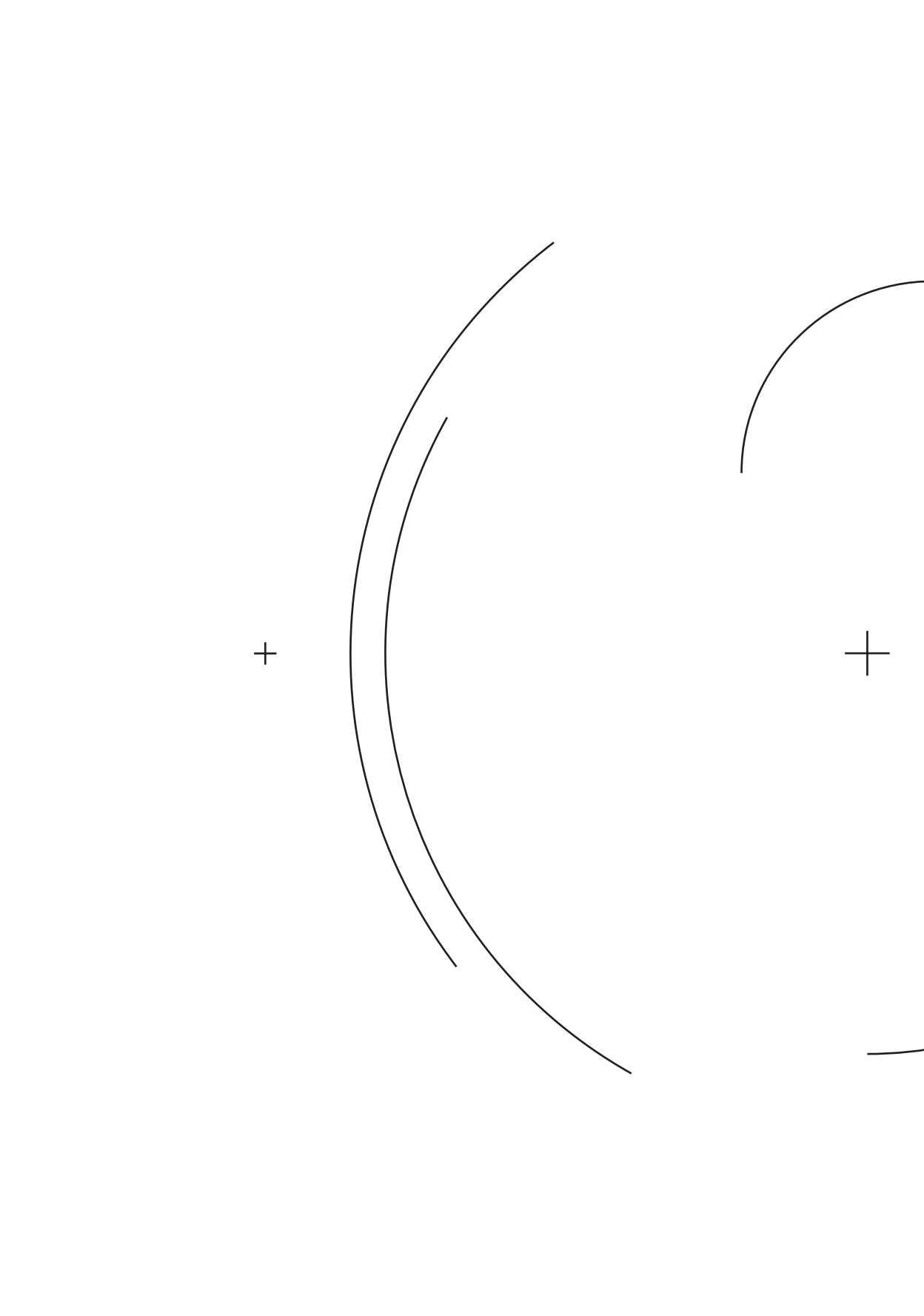
_Aesthetic Histories of Design Culture



Disegno

Journal of Design Culture
Double-blind peer-reviewed, open access scholarly journal

Aims and Scope

Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research papers published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process.
This journal does not charge APCs or submission charges.

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INTRODUCTION BY THE GUEST EDITOR

SOME DRAWDOWNS FROM THE WELL OF DESIGN CULTURE

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Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless? […] For the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more we do find that the earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable. No matter to what hazardous lengths we let out our line they still withdraw again, and further, into the depths.
—Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*

Ten years ago, *Disegno—Journal of Design Culture* began its journey with a founding volume in Hungarian that featured translations and original writings with the aim of helping readers get a picture of how to delineate the realm of design culture. The editorial introduction of that first volume rightly emphasised that design culture includes the totality of a multifaceted complexity of the designed environment—in its varied materialities, scales and technicities—and also the associated social practices and discourses (Szentpéteri 2014). Furthermore, it also includes an experiential spectrum—we can add, in line with the present volume. Having said that, we should contend, however, that the experiential dynamics of the all-overwhelming transmutation of regional cultures into a global design culture, and the concrete way in which design permeates our life and immerses us by providing us spheres of action, perception and reflection, has so far resisted any consistent clarification. Understanding the historical evolution of contemporary design culture and the behavioural and mental history behind it makes this task even more complex, so much so that we are reminded of the famous Thomas Mann quote about the bottomless past and its receding contours.

Not surprisingly, five years after the founding of *Disegno*, and halfway through the journal's past decade, another editorial introduction—again in Hungarian—provided readers, via a humorous saying from rural Tran-

sylvania, with a characterisation of design culture as "either something or going somewhere." (Horváth 2019) The ontological inconsequence of this saying and the source of its humorous nature are rooted in a traditional joke in which an old sage of the community is forced to explain an exotic creature, a tortoise, which is an unprecedented entity that none of the community members knows or is able to identify (including the wise man). Only through awareness of the various (cultural) perspectives, might one make the riddle in the joke transparent and understandable. For the intended audience of the joke, the tortoise does not pose a challenge, while the community depicted in it lacks the means to rightly recognise the tiny and quite resistant creature.

The situation we find ourselves in when we try to identify contemporary design culture seems to be quite similar, but a less cheerful one compared to the encounter of the guessing wise man with the tortoise. It happens to be like this at least in the Global North, where every social stratum is thoroughly embedded in the meshwork of design capitalism and captive to its gigantic bubble, its hyperobject to be more precise (Szentpéteri 2020; Thackara 2006; Morton 2013). One feels only a total outsider, such as a visitor from Mars, would be able to discern all of the crucial specificities and unique features of our reigning life form fuelled by financialisation, efficiency, rationalisation, calculation, anticipation, and coordination (Julier 2023).

In this regard, neither can the present volume hold the ambition to be a game changer, nor it can promise any substantial turnaround for the insights the academic community possesses on the conditions of our Capitalocene settings (Malm and Hornborg 2014). What it does offer are some insightful contributions to the pre-history and latent dynamics of our contemporary environmental, social, communicational, and living conditions, with particular regard to those aspects that are hard to recognise, for being mental habits, longstanding evaluations, and deeply entrenched sensibilities and tastes. Due to the complexity of its objects and themes, the scholarly study of design culture cannot help but embrace as many disciplinary resources as it can. Amongst them, aesthetics proves to be a highly eligible, indeed, eminent means. Although aesthetics developed in the humanities as a field of expertise about the arts, both its origins, and also its current evolution make it an ideal candidate for producing substantial outcomes in inquiries into everyday life, its objects, places and behaviours.[1]

This conviction was the starting point when the Doctoral School at Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design, Budapest in cooperation with the Everyday Aesthetics Network, organised an international conference in 2023 under the title *Designing Everyday Experience*.[2] If things, environments, and processes are either goals, materials, means, or elements of design, then it is the experience that stands on the flip side, together with the appreciation, evaluation, interpretation, and sharing of it.

[1] *For an introduction, see Saito 2019.*

[2] *https://dee.mome.hu/*

The organisers of the conference addressed the academic community with the following questions: How can objects of design help us shape our everyday habits and routines by corralling our behavioural patterns? How do power relations define the standards of everydayness through designed objects and tools? What is the specific contribution of art objects in shaping and defining our everydayness? How can we design environments (cityscapes, soundscapes, parks, places for sightseeing, skywalks) with the aim of triggering a specific aesthetic experience (sublimity, the picturesque, etc.)? How to conceptualise the natural and artificial component of atmospheres felt in designed environments on various scales? What is the contribution of routines in building our experience of the world? What role do habits play in supporting, regulating and enabling our aesthetic life? Where is the fine line between the ordinary and the extraordinary in a design culture?

Most of the texts in the present volume were born from the thought experiments by which the conference contributors sought to answer to some of the above questions. In his writing on the roots of aesthetic sensibility and its discourse, which unfolded from mostly natural or attitudinal phenomena, Endre Szécsényi convincingly argues that the discipline of aesthetics emerged in the essays of London daily journals of the early eighteenth century and originally "was not art-centred at all". So decidedly so that the aesthetic stance expressed in the relevant texts written by Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, George Berkeley, and Henry Grove must be seen as the historical antecedent of what we nowadays call "everyday aesthetics" (Mandoki 2007; Saito 2008). A substantial difference, though, is what was then experienced and understood through aesthetic sensibility as a consequence of some higher, divine design and a model for a potentially more dignified human life has, since then, lost most of its metaphysical resonance but retained its sense of "the extraordinary in the ordinary." (Leddy 2012)

Artists and designers who developed and followed the idea, the dream (or even mirage) of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would have never agreed with a culture that keeps the objective-factual and the experiential side, aspects of ordinariness and extraordinariness, apart. After the "methodological" historiography by Szécsényi, the volume proceeds by investigating their ideas. In his "Total Design of Everyday Life: Historical Ideals and Dilemmas of the Gesamtkunstwerk," Anders V. Munch provides a historical survey of the novelty which lies in tracing "the design of everyday life" in the broadest sense, a veritable total design that stems from the idea of union between arts and other creative disciplines and aims at a social and political impact tied to upending social hierarchies. One might be tempted to conclude that while art and design have ever been threatened with becoming sheer means of beautification of the exploitative conditions, *Gesamtkunstwerk* as total design dismisses the idea of beautification altogether as it resists to keep a dichotomy between

the aesthetically heightened and the ordinary (Leddy 2012). However, if it loses its aim, it becomes responsible for the aesthetic vulnerability of the total lifeworld by the power of capital.

The subsequent study written by Ben Highmore, one of the initiators of design culture studies, evokes and analyses the liberating aspirations that have arisen in the aftermath of a cataclysm that included both the collapse of a totalising (and also aesthetically totalising) military power and the layers of war trauma. The latter resulted in a wounded urban fabric of post-WWII Europe and also a social hesitancy regarding the upbringing of the next generation. Highmore's article fills a gap in broadening the historical knowledge of design culture as it collects and revisits the discourse that emerged from the so-called experimental playground movement after 1945. He claims the activity of imaginative place-making by makeshift playing structures erected by a socially unsupervised youth on abandoned bombing sites and other junk spaces should be seen as a fundamental and everyday aesthetic activity that has importance not only through its influence on later design pedagogues like Simon Nicholson, but also by its relevance today in seeking alternatives to what David Harvey calls the spatial fix (Harvey 2001). Highmore convincingly shows how the experimental playground could be taken both as a crucial element of design culture and a laboratory of gestures for a richer aesthetic life.[3]

Urban perspectives, "junk space" (Koolhaas 2002), a pondering over the possibility of play, and disclosure of the hidden elements of recent social history are also present in Barborá Kundračíková's "'Black Holes' Exploitation: A Central European City between Monument, Document, and Mockument," which is a complex research report that relies equally on methodological grounding, and discursive and visual sources. Her interest is not so much in how historical Central European cities are built along the defining socio-historical developments but rather in how certain under-defined parts of those cities condense alternatives for their reigning urban structures and provoke the social imagination. The theoretical insights of the study are illustrated in one case study—the example of the city of Olomouc in the Czech Republic.

An essay article written by Anna Keszeg on the art of Marion Baruch follows the four research papers. Although its theme and scope might suggest a substantial shift from the previous contributions, this is not the case. Keszeg presents the Romanian-born Italian artist Baruch as a creator of "negative space" providing visitors with a temporary void that people can try to fill with feelings, desires, and dreams. In this respect, her artistic approach is not so alien to the experimental playgrounds that Highmore analyses and the urban black holes that Kundračíková discusses. Another significant feature of Baruch is that her art can be defined as something that transcends design. One might take this literally since it develops by starting from outworn fashion and textile remnants.

[3] *Cf.* Laboratoire du Geste, *http://www.laboratoiredugeste.com/*

Baruch herself calls her work superart, referring also to consumer society. However, she tries not to rise above the milieu of design capitalism but to submerge in its depths while highlighting textile remnants as monuments to everyday people and everyday experiences. As Keszeg concludes, "Baruch's concept of negative space serves as a metaphor for almost every gap in contemporary human experience, making it a universal methodology."

The arc that unites the research writings of the present volume can be summarised with the view that design culture simultaneously provides an ever-growing totalisation of human agency and intervention but also creates endless chiasms and ruptures that are pregnant with aesthetic wealth, experiential freedom, and social, even political imagination. Everydayness and art are both potent associates of those anti-structures. If design is understood as world-making, settling humans down, social engineering, and facade-like representation, it also creates its own shady, messy, and anomalous backyard as an unavoidable side-effect. The recognition and awareness of this "hinterland" requires from us a lively and refined aesthetic sensitivity, a key component of any historical understanding (Gadamer 2000).

Personal and universal aspects of the above-mentioned aesthetic maturity and awareness regarding to the ways one can experience present-day design culture are deliberated in the interview this volume includes. During the three days of the 2023 conference, *Designing Everyday Experience*, Jessica Hemmings approached Yuriko Saito, the Japanese-American philosopher who played a central part in the recent revival of interest in everyday practices and human-environment relations as aesthetic phenomena (Saito 2017, 2022).

Design culture—when understood as the totally aestheticised form of neoliberal capitalism—takes its lead from consumer society: the willingness of passive immersion and self-surrendering. In contrast, contemporary fine art practices seek a different possibility of immersion that is offered to the visitor as an activated presence. The closing article, an exhibition and catalogue review by Martha Kicsiny, considers the opportunities and capacities of such immersive aspirations.

The well of the past regarding the aesthetic experience and design culture is indeed deep. No immersion can reach its bottom. However, drawdowns are not about overcoming distance. Those are for having some thirst-quenching juice from the well. And sometimes the past proves to be less stale than any highs of the present. I hope the reader will appreciate its freshness!

Bálint Veres

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