# Inequality by design? Why we need to start talking about aesthetics, design and politics

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These days, 'aesthetics' are everywhere: we encounter them as apps, as brands, as lifestyles etc. As both ubiquitous and omnipresent, 'aesthetics' now do not only claim a central role in narratives about how we could/should configure our everyday lives, but have quietly become a key link in the powerful interplay of sociality, design and politics: In two recent articles in The Verge and The Guardian, American writer Kyle Chayka criticises a global 'harmonisation of taste', i.e. the same 'hipster aesthetic' that characterises cafés, shops and (preferably shared) work spaces around the globe. He calls this phenomenon 'AirSpace'. In 'AirSpace', a certain 'class' enjoys a 'homogenous aesthetic' made up of minimalist interior with Edison bulbs, craft beer and fast internet. Transitioning between different 'AirSpace' locations is smooth and almost 'as painless as reloading a website'.

And while there is nothing wrong with criticising AirSpace's homogenous aesthetic – who wouldn't rather be 'cool' than bored? – it comes both as a frustration and as an opportunity that this piece falls into the common trap of deploying the term 'aesthetic' in its most simplified version, namely as an expression of 'objective' beauty or 'style'.

Even though Chayka, following Paulicelli and Clark (2008), admits to an 'aesthetic gentrification' deriving from the capitalist workings of Silicon Valley (and Airbnb in particular) which splits the world in two, he misses the point: it is not enough to state that the problem is that 'you either belong to the AirSpace class or you don't' – we need to ask *How?* and *Why?*

We have known for a very long time, starting with Kant's 'judgement of taste' and somewhat peaking with Bourdieu's work on 'distinction', that taste and (social) class are deeply entangled with 'aesthetics'. But we also know that the term 'aesthetics' traditionally encompasses not just beauty and artistry, but the profound relationship between our material environment, sociality and materiality (Baumgarten 1750/58 [1983]).

If we put this into the context of 'AirSpace', the problem is not homogeneity per se, but that it surfaces as a symptom of the very powerful interplay of aesthetics, design and politics. That is to say, if we are after the *How?* and the *Why?* of the 'AirSpaces' of this world, then we need to shift focus to those who configure them via aesthetic considerations: designers.

This becomes a particularly pressing matter in the context of growing urban inequalities. Let's take an example from our doorstep: London's urban space currently undergoes rapid change much of which is characterised by large-scale gentrification 'designed' to increase land value for private developers. Here, the way in which designers, amongst other actors, deploy 'aesthetics' becomes a core mechanism for a rather brutal form of (Bourdieu'an) 'distinction' that is brought upon whole neighbourhoods and communities.

The way in which designers put together materials, images and people on hoardings and in marketing suites for new developments (preferable on formerly council-owned land) crudely plays on distinct aesthetic configurations and preferences to attract a particular social class which is primarily framed through economic capital.



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Put simply, 'aesthetics', here, are not just about 'style' or 'beauty' but are deployed as instrument for socio-economic distinction and clearly work as part of (re-)producing urban inequalities, for example through gentrification. And in this capacity, they do not hover on the surface as part of a sales exercise and cannot be reduced to a representation: aesthetic considerations work internally to express value – or rather: who and what is being valued. In other words, they are part of a 'classificatory system' (Tyler 2015) that is put to work commercially and is used by designers and other decision makers to make sense of 'the social'.

But, to be clear, this is not to point the finger at designers as 'the bad guys' who are solely responsible for the many unequitable spaces that characterise our cities today. Rather, it is to make clear that talking about design means looking at a profoundly socio-political issue: design and how it operationalises 'aesthetics' powerfully and unavoidably imagines how we *will* live (and this relates to all sorts of design, from product to services and spatial design). Therefore, as a profoundly consequential exercise in social imagination, design occupies a prominent position in how we shape our societies – despite the fact that these social imaginations might be disguised by all sorts of things, from pragmatic to economic and cultural motifs and narratives.

But that design is (socially) intentional is neither a surprise nor the point here. It is a call for sociologists and design practitioners and academics alike to start focussing on the complex ways in which design processes are entangled with (global) commerce, power dynamics and politics. In other words, we need to have a more critical and more thorough sociological investigation of how aesthetics are operationalised by practitioners. We need to ask questions like 'how do these practitioners link up material configurations of space (bearing in mind different things like quality and durability of material) with concepts such as "community"?'.

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Most importantly, the emphasis here must be on creating a productive dialogue between analysts and actors: only if we accept design practitioner as experts in their own profession and, as analysts, take a step back from morally charged judgements of these professional practices can we learn how something manifests as 'unequal' in processes of design. As analysts, we must be prepared to let this approach challenge not only our academic methodologies (or our own 'secrets of trade'), but also our own elite position in a global and unequal nexus of power and 'knowledge' – simply, because this is a very necessary step given growing global inequalities, many of which are fuelled by processes of 'design'. Creating spaces for critical and productive discussions between all sorts of experts, ranging from designers, planners, academics, 'communities', is not only crucial for addressing these issues intellectually and pragmatically, but might also be a task for universities in the future. This, surely, is not a scary but a very exciting prospect – and it is why we need to start talking about aesthetics, design and politics beyond 'AirSpace'.

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