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WE NEED TO TALK

Research + Realities

Conversations about beauty in design have become decidedly hush-hush. But beauty does not have to be a competition, it can be about sustainable consumption, reconnection to nature, and basic human needs.

In today's design discourse, there is a word that very few dare to utter aloud: beauty. We are programmed to believe that beauty refers to the superficial, the distracting, the decorative, or even the useless. But, beauty also undeniably refers to something fundamental: pleasure or enjoyment, caused by a visual experience.

Although this is a completely separate neurological process than 'needing', this type of 'liking' is proven to be vital to our being. Why, then, is beauty off-limits in critical discourse about design?

In her 2015 article, *Beauty and Critical Art: Is Beauty at Odds with Critical-Political Engagement?*, scholar Maria-Alina Asavei points to an important reason why beauty is silenced. Beautiful things may distract our attention from injustice, pain, moral crimes and suffering, or to the close reader, from 'what is really going on in the world'. The typical argument goes, "Beauty, by pre-occupying our attention, makes us inattentive, and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just." Asavei looks at the topic through the lens of modern art, but she also suggests a plausible reason why beauty is avoided in today's design discourse.

Since the start of the 21st century, designers have claimed a seat at the table in discussions about topics such as inclusivity and the climate crisis. But as design has become increasingly socially and politically engaged, beauty is blatantly ignored as a decisive driver to pull us back into harmony with nature and with each other.

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The discussions about what design can do for a world in constant crisis is still largely influenced by a modernist tradition. With the rise of modernism at the dawn of the 20th century, function and economic benefits were favoured over pleasure and enjoyment – and thus over beauty – in design.

According to the modernist movement, these values were an antidote to the excessive, 'useless' and distracting decoration of the late 19th century. In short, beauty became a dirty word. This points us to another important reason why we do not want to talk about beauty: the fear of being judged. Beauty is not considered a justifiable reason to act and has become a source of discomfort for design professionals. This fear is cultivated by critics and by platforms that facilitate and shape the design discourse.

Can beauty be functional and beneficial in the context of current day society? The one place within the contemporary design realm where this thought is entertained is fashion, a field that – just as beauty – is often still dismissed as frivolous and irrelevant. Elissa Brunato for example refused to sacrifice beauty while creating her bio-scientific iridescent sequins for the fashion industry. She believes that beauty is a way to reconnect humans to nature, as well as a necessary strategy in making sustainable consumption attractive. Helen Storey became the first designer in residence in Za'atari, the largest camp for Syrian refugees in the Middle East, with *Dress for Our Time*, a project that recognizes beauty as a basic human need.

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In other fields of design beauty is rarely recognized in such a way. This is most evident in architecture, in which function, efficiency, and sustainability became leading paradigms. London-based architect and designer Adam Nathaniel Furman recently argued that a lack of diversity in the field of architecture and design is the cause of a lack of discussion about beauty. His works can be interpreted as statements that beauty is not only decorative, but also a crucial part of our identity, and of our multicultural and multifaceted contemporary visual culture.

Re-entering into the conversation about beauty can create more room for diversity in the field of design as Furman argues. Brunato and Storey show that it can also spark new durable strategies.

Contemporary design that aspires to play a role in solving the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves in still tends to emphasize a 'utilitarian' perspective. It misses opportunities to transform our idea of sustainability from a set of rules that feel distant and obligatory, to a more holistic and human concept that truly connects us with our surroundings. Beauty was once anchored in our relationship to nature. Nowadays, a conservative sustainability fetishism is taking us hostage in a world where beauty is off-limits.

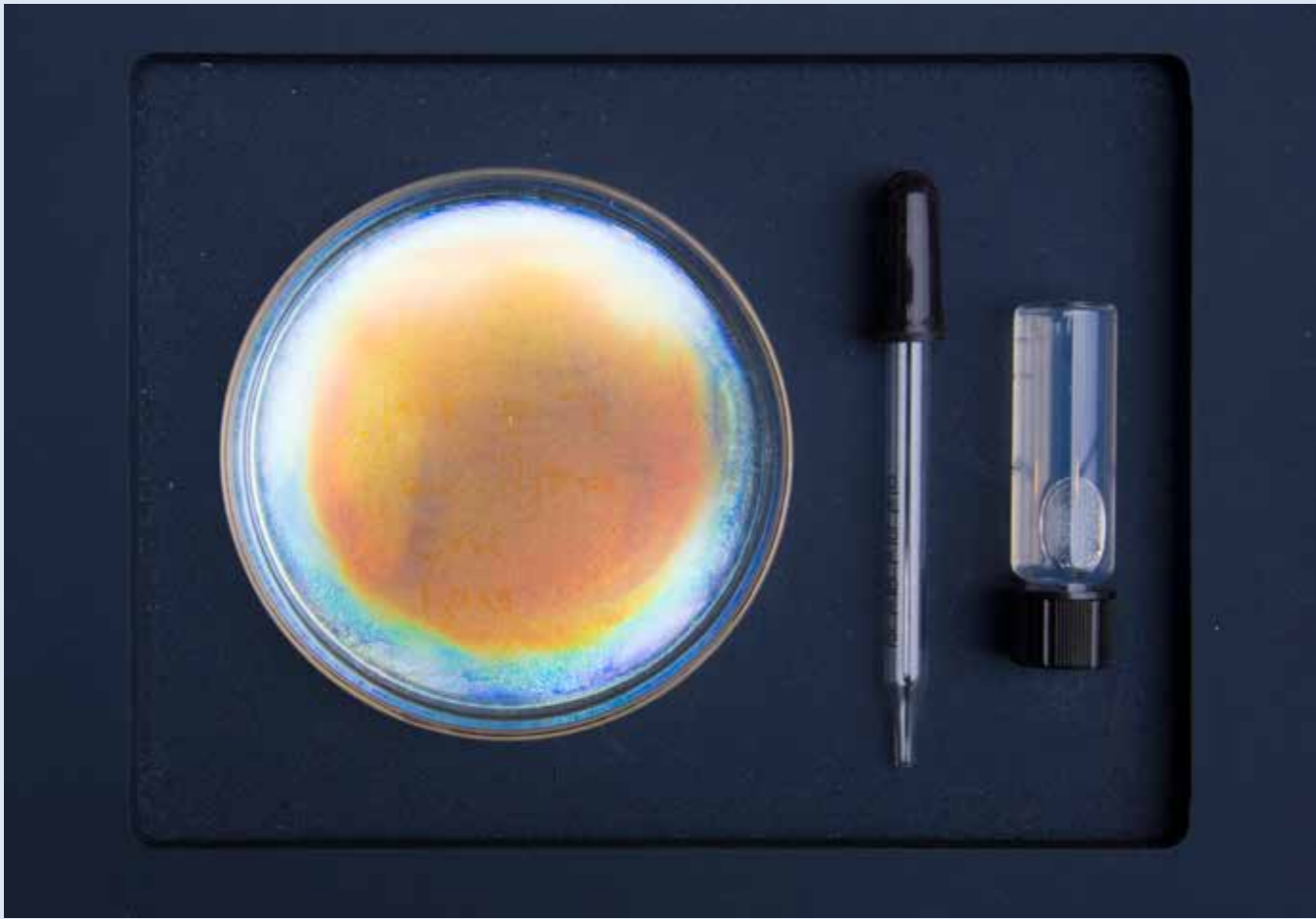
The word 'sustainable' is often exploited and abused, as it only refers to production methods or materials that can be reused or recycled. Products designed with this vision in mind are often flimsy, temporary, unnecessarily frugal and bland. If things are made to last – durable,

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timeless, solid, indestructible, beautiful and culturally rooted – they will be treasured, valued, and taken care of. Timeless objects, such as the archaic and plain concrete work of David Umemoto, the architecture of Valerio Olgiati or the monumental jewellery pieces by Tools for Progress, will live long after we have passed away.

Beauty is considered a dangerous business, but it can be a powerful tool to forge meaningful and long-lasting relationships between people and objects, and between people in general. This particular power is positive and transformative, and should be a crucial parameter in design criticism. Rather than shaming designers for pursuing beauty, we should encourage them to do so. The problem is not with beauty itself, but with what it is taken to be, and by whom.

If we agree to disagree about beauty, can we at least keep the conversation on the table? Can we open up our discourse to those questioning the conventional aesthetic norms to try and find new insights? And can we agree to make terms such as pleasure, healing, generosity and emotion, part of the conversation? It is time to reinstate beauty and review its significant position and function in design. Not by trying to define it, but by cultivating and exploring what beauty entails rather than suppressing the conversation about it.

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www.officeccxd.com
www.toolsforprogress.org

1. Helen Storey, Dress for our Time
Image: David Betteridge
2. Valerio Olgiati, Pearling Path
Image: © Archive Olgiati
3. Elissa Brunato, Bio-Iridescent Sequin
The material is engineered to refract light through its inherent structure.
Image: Elissa Brunato
4. TOOLS FOR PROGRESS, Le Flâneur and Silver Necklace
Image: TOOLS FOR PROGRESS
5. David Umemoto, Stairway no6B
Image: David Umemoto

→ Text by Cédric Van Parys and Esther Muñoz Grootveld