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Design, ideology and behavior

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Design, ideology and behavior

- a theoretical discussion of design with Statsfængslet Østjylland¹ as case

Is design an ideological practice resulting in objects with political/moral significance? Can design furthermore be said to influence our everyday behavior and social interaction? These are the guiding research questions of my Ph.D. dissertation and will be the main topic for my presentation at the conference 'Politics of Designing'.

In order to give these rather philosophical questions an empirical grounding I have chosen to work with a 'designed environment' as my main case. For this purpose I have chosen the newest and most secure prison in Denmark, Statsfængslet Østjylland. The prison opened in 2006 and is the first new prison in Denmark since 1976. It is designed by the architectural firm Friis & Moltke. Statsfængslet Østjylland is considered the most secure prison in the country. It is designed according to current knowledge about group management and is equipped with state of the art technology.

The choice of a prison as my primary example has to do with the fact that as a designed structure the prison institution embodies and symbolizes the profoundly political notions of crime and punishment, which allows me to analyze in depth the connection between immaterial values and a materialized entity. In order to do this I have adopted a historical perspective in writing about the changing ideas about the criminal subject as well as the history and architectonic development of the prison institution.

In order to answer the second question – if and how design mediates behavior – I have used a combination of methods inspired by anthropology, sociology and studies in environmental design. My point of departure have been a notion that in order to learn how the building structures and influences action I will have to go see for my self as well as ask its actual users how they feel about it. Thus I have been doing observations of everyday life in the prison as well as interviews with a number of people representing management, the prison officers and the prison population in order to learn about their perspective on the new prison and whether or not they feel that it structures their internal interaction differently from the old one.

After having finishing my case study, which I hope will present new ways of reflecting on the interconnected relationship between design and non-material values, I will go on to discuss classical theories about design and ideology. These include seminal texts such as the Arts and Crafts movements' ideas about design and morality, Adolf Loos' essay 'Ornament and crime' as well as newer contributions such as Adrian Forty's fascinating analysis of the symbolic value of things as well as designers Fiona Raby's and Anthony Dunne's concept of ideological design.

¹ 'Statsfængslet Østjylland' translates to 'The State Prison of Eastern Jutland'.

Finally I will go on to discuss if and how design objects as well as design systems can be said to influence behavior. In order to do this I will draw on classical texts from the field of STS in order to establish a connection between the design of things and their role as active agents in shaping our society and social relations. As part of this discussion I will criticize the art historical approach to designed objects for being too shallow and one-sided. Rather, I will argue, we need to open up the field of design and design research to encompass the designed object both as a designed form *and* as a cluster of functions around which multiple social relations and meanings pivot. As such design must be seen as an aesthetic/technological discipline and hence as a practice that profoundly influences and gives shape to our society and social life.