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Self-Knowledge by Proxy: 
Parsons on Philosophy of Design and the Modernist Vision

Abstract  Glenn Parsons’s 2016 work, The Philosophy of Design, looks deeply at design in general, and at the Modernist approach to design in particular. The book would make an excellent textbook, but one could equally treat it as a research monograph. This article provides a detailed review of the book as a contribution to design research. The author’s efforts are original and commendable, although the work is not entirely immune to disagreement. The article highlights the main line of reasoning to guide future readers, and develops a number of considerations. These include a reflection on the feasibility of Modernist design thinking, some background on the nature and origins of the philosophy of design as a discipline, a defense of the notion of a stable essence of the concept of design, and a critical analysis of Parsons’s definition of design.

Keywords  Definition of design  Epistemology of design  Modernism  Philosophy of design

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Introduction

Serious reflection on the wonders and puzzles of design is a delightful way to tickle your mind. If you are a student or practitioner of design, it is potentially empowering, too, because it affords you a deeper understanding of what you are doing, and awareness of the consequences your work may lead to. For example, such reflection may enable you to appreciate design as a means of affecting people’s everyday lives for the better in many small ways, and perhaps some bigger ones. And it may draw your attention to the moral responsibility you incur as a designer.

To be effective, serious reflection on design requires philosophical flair and craftsmanship at a level that designers are not trained to master. How fortunate we are, therefore, that a professional philosopher came along, took the time and effort to acquire a thorough understanding of design, its history, and its literature, and then present his philosophical reflection about what design is and how it works. His insights are about us, in our capacity as human beings in general, and designers in particular. That is what Glenn Parsons has done in his recent book The Philosophy of Design. Parsons is the first philosopher ever – as far as I am aware – to generously offer us an entire book full of deep, professional self-knowledge to be gained by proxy, as it were. All we need to do is find a good chair and the requisite peace of mind to read and contemplate what he has to say.

This paper offers a thorough review of Parsons’s book, and responds to certain parts of it. Arguably, the book has a dual aim – first, to function as a textbook introducing broadly the philosophy of design as a (rather new) subject in its own right; and second, to explore an original research problem within that broad field. I will consider the book primarily in its capacity as a contribution to design research.

In the following section, I outline Parsons’s aim(s), main line of reasoning, and contributions, and I make some comments along the way. I hope other readers of The Philosophy of Design will use the outline as a convenient, pocket-sized roadmap showing the main roads and distinctive landmarks of the rich philosophical terrain the book surveys in much greater detail. In this way, I also aim to highlight Parsons’s original research contribution. Parsons is far too modest about the merits of his work. For example, he announces that he “will consider the book worthwhile if it succeeds in showing that design is a realm worthy of philosophical exploration in its own right.” Parsons not only demonstrates this in his book – he also contributes to that exploration in a substantial way.

After the outline follows a discussion. On a cursory reading, this section may be skipped, in whole or in part. It provides some background information on the nature and origins of the philosophy of design and also features a more critical and in-depth consideration of certain aspects of the book that caught my attention.

The exposition and discussion of Parsons’s book ends with a short conclusion—including a warm recommendation.

Aims, Main Line of Reasoning, and Contributions—an Outline

The introduction (pp. 1–3)

Parsons gently introduces philosophy as a means of cultivating the “ability to see one’s daily practice” from “a broader perspective,” in “relation to other important dimensions of human life,” and thus to “think through its place in the grander scheme of things.” When applied to the daily practice of design, philosophy so conceived may be a source of professional self-knowledge for designers, as I suggest above.

According to Parsons, philosophers have largely neglected design so far, at least as a subject for study in its own right. But since “design today has a prevalence

2 The present review was originally commissioned as a traditional book review by the editor-in-chief of She Ji. It grew into something more research oriented. As a result, the editor suggested it be considered a hybrid “full-length article in the form of a book review.” For a review with a different profile of emphasis, see Mona Sloane, “Book Review: The Philosophy of Design by Glenn Parsons,” London School of Economics and Political Science, April 27, 2016, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/04/27/book-review-the-philosophy-of-design-by-glenn-parsons/.
3 Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 3.
4 I include page ranges so that page numbers cited in the Discussion section can be traced back to the relevant part of this outline.
5 Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 2.
and prestige that makes its neglect by philosophy rather glaring,” he finds that “the
time is ripe for a philosophical consideration of design.”

To consider design philosophically, however, there is no need for Parsons to
start from scratch. For, as he notes, “plenty of excellent philosophical work” al-
ready exists which is directly relevant to design, even though it may not be focused
specifically on it, including the work done in philosophical disciplines such as
“aesthetics, epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of science.” So, Parsons
says, “More than anything else, this book aims to bring this work together into a
systematic treatment.”

Parsons writes clearly, carefully avoiding insider jargon that might dishearten
readers, and he does not assume his readers are familiar with the few technical
terms that precision and convention require. As promised, he brings much relevant
material systematically together. He maintains a steady progression from general
considerations to more detailed and specialized aspects of his subject matter.
Along the way, he makes good use of illustrative examples (though visually-minded
readers will look in vain for illustrations in the literal sense). In these respects,
the book resembles an excellent textbook—one which should certainly be used,
in whole or in part, for teaching purposes. But The Philosophy of Design is much too
ambitious to be appreciated as a textbook alone. Parsons does not limit himself to
eclectically explaining to students what others have had to say about design from a
philosophical point of view. He has quite a few points of his own to make, particu-
larly regarding the Modernist movement.

He rejects the conventional view of Modernism as merely a “stylistic phase that
had its day and then passed into the history of Taste.” On the contrary, he con-
tends, “the Modernists saw, more clearly than anyone else, the central philosop-
highly original and ambitious research agenda, and it certainly reaches far beyond
what one would expect of a textbook.

Chapter 1. “What is Design?” (pp. 4–27)
In chapter 1, Parsons addresses the most fundamental of questions about design:
what is it? Not yet drawing on the Modernist ideas, he offers an instructive demon-
stration of one of the key competencies of a philosopher of the analytic tradition –
the noble art of developing a philosophical definition. By such a definition one tries
to capture the essence of a concept, by stating necessary and sufficient conditions
for something to fall under that concept. Parsons first shows some examples of
how not to do it, then presents a definition by Greg Bamford, glosses it in simpler
language, and augments it by adding a further condition. What he ends up with is
this:
“Design is the intentional solution of a problem, by the creation of plans for a
new sort of thing, where the plans would not be immediately seen, by a rea-
sonable person, as an inadequate solution.”

Unlike some definitions in the design-theoretical literature, Parsons’s definition is
not just stipulated. Each of its elements is discussed and justified. So, despite its ac-
knowledge roots in Bamford’s work, the definition constitutes an original contri-
bution. Although (like much else in philosophy) it is not immune to critical discuss-
ion, it has considerable prima facie plausibility, and it works all right for the book.
The definition raises some “ontological issues” that Parsons discusses in section 1.2. This makes for interesting and stimulating reading but is not essential to the main line of reasoning.

More importantly, he decides in section 1.3 that within the broad class of activities captured by his definition and called “design,” he will limit the scope of his inquiry to a sub-class, which he calls “Design” (spelled with an uppercase D). The general idea of Design is, roughly, that it is supposed to include what the likes of Eames, Ike and Stark—people typically called “designers”—are doing when designing, and exclude what other good folks, such as scientists, plumbers, and engineers are doing when they are designing.

I argue in the Discussion below that Parsons fails to provide a satisfactory characterization, let alone a philosophical definition, of Design as distinguished from design. However, as I will also argue, this doesn’t matter much—it does not undermine the main line of reasoning that we are considering here. So, for now, we’ll make do with the above loose sketch of the notion of Design as a special kind of design.  

**Chapter 2, “The Design Process” (pp. 28–53)**

The second chapter contains interesting discussions, based on extensive literature studies, of the nature and complexity of the design problems that Designers try to solve, how Design may interact with social structures in intricate ways, how Design problems and their solutions tend to evolve under mutual influence, and more.

Of particular importance to the main line of reasoning, as developed in subsequent chapters, are the four aspects—or criteria, as Parsons calls them later—of “good Design” discussed in section 2.1. These are functionality; aesthetic appeal; expressive or symbolic qualities suggesting a particular lifestyle or values; and mediation of the relationship between human beings and the world—an idea developed by philosopher Peter Paul Verbeek, among others.

Parsons returns to these criteria of good Design in an important passage in chapter 3 (quoted below) and again in more detail later. Function he treats at length in chapter 5, expression in chapter 4, aesthetics in chapter 6, and mediation resurfaces in chapter 7, in connection with “Design ethics.”

One of the delightfully mind-tickling passages of the book is section 2.4, where Parsons challenges the contention, widely shared among design researchers, that design problems belong to the kind of planning problems famously called “wicked” by Rittel and Webber. As he puts it, “On this view, it is not only large-scale problems of public policy, such as the ones discussed by Rittel and Webber, that are wicked or ill defined, but all Design problems, down to mundane examples like laying out a factory control room, or designing a new piece of furniture. But is this really so?”

Parsons first reviews some arguments supporting this idea, but rejects them and concludes “we do not have a compelling reason to extend Rittel and Webber’s notion of the wicked problem to Design problems in general: Design problems are not always ill-defined”—although he admits that “sometimes they are.”

Rittel and Webber list ten defining characteristics of wicked problems. It only takes a moment’s contemplation of that list to see that Parsons is right—his “mundane” examples (and many more one might come up with) do not exhibit all, or even many or most of the ten characteristics.

Next, Parsons returns to the acknowledged possibility that some (lowercase d) design problems—he cites the example of creating a more efficient office—actually are “wicked.” The idea he now subjects to critical scrutiny is that when facing a wicked problem, designers might hope to find some support in what Rittel and
Webber have to say about such problems in general.

In their discussion of the first characteristic (“There is no definite formulation of a wicked problem”) Rittel and Webber come up with the following dictum—which seems promising from the designer’s point of view: “The formulation of a wicked problem is the problem!” To support that claim, they analyze a core example of a wicked problem, the poverty problem, which Parsons also discusses.

Poverty partly means low income. But low income, in turn, might be put down to “deficiency of the national or regional economies,” or “deficiencies of cognitive and occupational skills within the labor force,” or “deficient physical and mental health”—and each ramification may lead to new ones. According to Rittel and Webber’s dictum, the key to finding a solution is finding the correct formulation of the problem, which amounts to identifying its crucial ramification(s). “Thus, if we recognize deficient mental health services as part of the problem, then—trivially enough—‘improvement of mental health services’ is a specification of solution.”

Referring to Rittel and Webber’s poverty example, Parsons argues that “contrary to what they say, when the ambiguity in a wicked problem is eliminated,–in other words, by settling for one or more of its ramifications—‘the problem is hardly solved.”

For, as he says, “‘improve mental health services’ is far from being a ‘plan’ one can see as likely to succeed: this is an aim, not a plan.” Again, I agree with Parsons: what we can learn from Rittel and Webber is at best how to analyze (wicked) design problems, not how to solve them.

Wrapping up his discussion of wicked problems, Parsons concludes that “In sum, the difficulty of Design cannot be attributed entirely to the ambiguity of the problems it addresses: Designers do confront genuine problems that call for a rational approach.” And he poses his central question—with which, as we have seen by now, Rittel and Webber’s ideas promise no help—“how is such an approach possible?”

That is one way of putting what Parsons calls “the fundamental problem for the Design process.” Shortly after, he describes it in more detail:

“The epistemological difficulty for Design is, in Galle’s words: ‘How … could the designer know (or be confident) at that time that the artifact would eventually serve its purpose?’”

At the time of designing—referred to as “that time” in the passage quoted—there is no object available for observation or experiment. Moreover, this epistemological problem exists—or is exacerbated—to the extent the designer is programmatically planning for a novel artifact that will differ radically from those we already know. As Parsons puts it,

“…a good Designer must be justified in thinking that his product will work.

But given that it is novel and has not been subjected to trial-and-error testing by tradition, the Designer seems to be left with no reason for confidence in its ability to satisfy the aims for which it was created.”

The last two sections of chapter 2 are dedicated to discussions of various possible responses to this epistemological problem. One by one, Parsons rejects them as inadequate or incomplete. That discussion constitutes a well-argued and original part of the book, but I shall refrain from summarizing it here.

He ends the chapter by singling out one particular response to the epistemological problem for further examination: “changing our conception of the nature of the Design problem so as to emphasize the search for functionality and downplay other aspects such as symbolism [elsewhere called “expression”] and aesthetics, where any guiding principles are harder to find.” This is the Modernist approach to Design.
Chapter 3, “Modernism” (pp. 54–68)
In the third chapter, Parsons introduces the Modernist approach to Design—“an approach that promises to alleviate [the epistemological problem].” 35

He focuses on Modernism in “its role as a philosophical position,” which “supported a rational conception of Design in two ways.” Modernism firstly reinterpreted the “key criteria of Design – the functional, [the aesthetic,] the symbolic [expressive], and the mediating” that Parsons introduced in section 2.1. 36 Modernism also claims to find “important linkages between [these criteria] that might facilitate the Designer’s effort to satisfy them all.” 37 Parsons reminds us that “solving Design problems – producing good Designs – is fraught with a basic epistemological difficulty,” 38 and adds that “Modernist thinking … addresses the problem … by inviting us to reconceive the very nature of Design problems.” 39

To provide some background, he offers a short exposition on the origins of Modernism and continues by explaining the reinterpretation and linkages I mentioned above. I was impressed by his unique presentation of familiar historical figures and ideas – Marx, William Morris, Ruskin, Le Corbusier, Gropius and his Bauhaus school, Adolf Loos, Sullivan – in relation to the unfamiliar idea of Modernism as a philosophy promising a solution to the epistemological problem of Design.

The upshot of Parsons’s interpretation of the historical evidence is that Modernism, from its very beginning, was “a normative movement” which sought to replace commonplace notions of popular design by more deeply-rooted notions of quality, 40 for “the masses themselves might well be unaware of what they need. Rather than follow contemporary taste, the Designer must lead the way by delivering items of genuine quality – good Design.” 41 The aim of the Modernists was “not to turn Design into a ‘fine art’ or tradition-based craft, but to blend the best elements of traditional craftsmanship, modern mass production, and fine art into a new way of producing material goods that made sense in the social context of contemporary life.” 42

And as for the Modernists’ rational conception of Design and the criteria for good Design, a first element is Loos’ rejection of ornamentation – “decoration or adornment ... that bears no relation to ... utilitarian purpose.” 43 However, according to Parsons the Modernists did not see the elimination of ornament “as an impoverishment of the symbolic or expressive aspect of Design, but as an enrichment of it.” Design products, they thought, can express something via their functional elements – in other words, by being planned with function in mind. In particular, products should represent the Zeitgeist – the “spirit of the age,” as Gropius would have it. 44

Furthermore, Parsons suggests that according to Modernist thinking, there is a linkage between function and a particular kind of aesthetic value 45 he terms “functional beauty,” which returns as a theme in section 6.4. He finds this idea present in Loos’ work, but also notes that it extends much further back, to the ancient Greeks. “Modernism taps into a long-standing tradition that views a thing’s functionality, or its fitness for its purpose, as giving rise to beauty or aesthetic appeal.” The idea had been dormant, Parsons tells us, but was rejuvenated with the advent of “spectacular machines such as the steam engine.” 46

At the end of section 3.2, Parsons sums up the Modernist reconceptualization of Design problems as follows:

“If the Designer merely constructs the object [or rather, creates plans for an artifact] to perform its function, then expression, aesthetic value, and mediation become, as it were, ‘spin-off’ values that follow effortlessly. When coupled with the idea – explored in chapter 2 – that the Designer can have access to reliable general principles when it comes to function, the allure of the Modernist vision becomes plain. By focusing on producing functional goods, Designers follow from Rittel and Webber’s general characterization of such problems.”

28 Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 43.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 35.
32 Compare this with the phrase “plans for a new sort of thing” in the definition of design quoted earlier. For a discussion of novelty in design, see particularly Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 48, 100.
34 Ibid., 53.
35 Ibid., 54.
36 The terminology is not entirely consistent throughout the book, which makes it a bit difficult at times for the reader to keep track. Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 54.
38 Ibid., 58–59.
39 Ibid., 59.
40 Ibid., 56.
41 Ibid., 58. Those were heady days, when notions of progress for the masses, and expertise, did not trigger accusations of elitism. Anyone attempting to reinstate the central tenets of Modernist thinking in design today is likely to face these accusations. They should prepare to face them, or perhaps take measures to steer clear.
42 Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 58.
43 Ibid., 59.
44 Ibid., 61. Parsons elaborates further on the Zeitgeist idea in chapter 4.
45 Parsons uses “aesthetic value” and “beauty” interchangeably, although in the literature their meanings are sometimes distinguished. See Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 166, note 3.
can rationally tackle the problems that confront them, creating a material world that is not only useful [functional] but meaningful [expressive], socially progressive [mediating], and beautiful [aesthetically valuable].”

As indicated by the italicized words, the Modernist approach to Design, as construed by Parsons, promises to help the designer fulfill the criteria he introduced in section 2.1. It seems plausible enough that the search for function can be rationally guided by reliable general principles—akin, perhaps, to the laws of physics exploited by engineers or to Don Norman’s principles concerning functionality.

And if the alleged associations or linkages actually hold—and work—between function and the other three criteria for good Design, then indeed we glimpse the beginnings of a response to the epistemological problem of Design.

The chapter closes with a rebuttal of various attacks that have been mounted against Modernism over the years. Parsons is very convincing here—like a competent defense lawyer, he calmly and methodically dismantles his opponents’ arguments one by one and gets his client acquitted.

**Status at the watershed**

Let us pause to consider the main line of reasoning Parsons has developed so far. Up to and including chapter 3, he has

- Introduced the epistemological problem as “the fundamental problem for the Design process;”
- Convincingly attempted to “reconstruct key Modernist ideas” from scattered historical evidence, which results in an explicit formulation of “the
Modernist vision” involving a set of criteria for good Design, and (postu-
lated) linkages between them;\textsuperscript{53}

- Shown that the Modernist vision promises to solve the epistemological
  problem of Design – which arguably it will, provided the “linkages” between
  functionality and the other criteria for good Design (expression, aesthetic
  value, and mediation) work as intended; and

- Delivered a cogent defense of Modernism against various attacks which
  might otherwise have rendered the Modernist vision null and void.

Once my reading of chapter 3 was complete, I felt the main line of reasoning had
reached a watershed. Parsons had provided me with an exciting insight about the
Modernist vision. However, it was not clear to me what to expect from his proposed
“critical analysis”\textsuperscript{54} of it, nor where the envisioned “systematic treatment”\textsuperscript{55} was
supposed to lead me. I wondered if the remaining chapters of the book would
satisfy my growing curiosity regarding the feasibility of the Modernist vision. To
what extent could Parsons’s reconstructed Modernist vision have been, or become,
a feasible approach to Designing – one that not only promises but offers a workable
solution to the epistemological problem of Design?

In my outline of the remaining chapters, I will take my compass bearings on
this question of feasibility as a means of perceiving the overall direction of what I
see as Parsons’s main line of reasoning.

\textit{Chapter 4, “Expression” (pp. 69–84)}

In the opening paragraph of chapter 4, Parsons briefly refers to his reconstruction
of the Modernist vision, and announces – true to his promise from the Introduc-
tion – that he will now “begin a critical examination of this approach.”\textsuperscript{56} In chapter
4 he addresses the question of how the Modernist’s alleged linkage between a focus
on function and the quality of expression may work. This suggests that we are
moving towards an answer to the feasibility question.

He first smoothly explores the literature on meaning in design and the possi-
bility of expressing a variety of meanings – such as social status or lifestyle values –
through design. It seems the Modernist vision does not allow for the expression of
such (increasingly important) meanings – it “provides us with, at best, a quite
impo\textup{ver}ished conception of [the expressive dimension of consumer goods].”\textsuperscript{57} However,
this “does not under\textup{cut} the fundamental Modernist claim that good Design
expresses only the Zeitgeist since that claim is a normative one…. That is … even if
people do value goods for expressing other things … they ought not to do so.”\textsuperscript{58}

After that follows a rational reconstruction\textsuperscript{59} of a Loos-inspired Modernist ar-
gument for how meaningful expression may be attained by focusing on function
rather than ornament. Oddly enough, this discussion does not restrict consider-
ation to an expression of the Zeitgeist. Parsons enters into an extended sequence
of arguments and alternating counter-arguments to test by fire the Modernist idea
concerning the linkage between function and the expression of meaning.

The outcome of this quasi-dialogue\textsuperscript{60} is that the Modernist idea survives – if
only just. And yet, some doubt still surrounds the Modernist claim that functional
Design will “automatically” express the Zeitgeist.

\textit{Chapter 5, “The Concept of Function” (pp. 85–102)}

Though perhaps not settling the matter of Zeitgeist-expression for good, chapter 5
expounds an “evolutionary account of function” which, as Parsons very cautiously
puts it, “might seem to lend some support to the Modernist idea that functional
Design will be … expressive of a culture’s Zeitgeist.”\textsuperscript{61} The Zeitgeist issue is not
taken up again later in the book, nor is the question of whether functional Design

\textsuperscript{53} Further reconstruction
follows in later chapters.

\textsuperscript{54} Parsons, \textit{The Philosophy of
Design}, 3.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 69.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 74, emphasis original.

\textsuperscript{59} “Rational reconstruction” is
a philosophical method that is
central to Parsons’s project. For
comparison, see Parsons, \textit{The
Philosophy of Design}, 59, and 161,
note 5. The passage mentioned
here is particularly illustrative of
the method.

\textsuperscript{60} This sequence is another nice
illustration of a philosophical
method at work—one with roots
stretching back, presumably, to
Plato’s dialogues.

\textsuperscript{61} Parsons, \textit{The Philosophy of
Design}, 100.
might express other meanings related to lifestyle, social status, and so on. So as for the link between function and meaningful expression, we may conclude that at best the Modernist vision allows for a “rather impoverished” expression via function—namely expression of the Zeitgeist, but even this is somewhat uncertain.

Chapter 5 is not primarily focused on the expression issue, however. It features a much broader exploration and critical analysis of the notion of function, which is of fundamental importance to the Modernist vision. Although we often speak confidently about function, it is not at all evident what the function of an artifact is. Is the function of an artifact what the designer intended as its use, or is it how people actually use it? If “I buy a chair and use it, not for sitting, but to display some books in my living room, or to hang the next day’s clothes on before I go to bed, aren’t these things the ‘function’ of that artifact?” Parsons asks.

He introduces a notion of proper function to clarify this “indeterminacy,” and suggests that perhaps an evolutionary account fills the bill for a workable conception of proper functions of artifacts. The main idea is that the proper function of an artifact depends on the history of its “ancestors” —it is what, in the past, led to the production of that kind of artifact. So, the “indeterminacy of function” with which the chapter began is not fatal to the (potential) feasibility of the Modernist vision so far.

Later on, Parsons returns to the epistemological problem of how the Designer can “know (or be confident)” that a novel artifact will “eventually serve its purpose” — that it will be able to “satisfy the aims for which it was created.” The epistemological problem, you will recall, was triggered by the novelty of the proposed artifact. But if the evolutionary theory of proper functions is right—that the proper function of an artifact is “a social aspect of an already-existing artifact type that has evolved through its use and reproduction,” and hence not determined by the Designer—then perhaps there is no genuine novelty involved in Design, and the whole epistemological problem dissolves! For example, “when the Wright brothers invented the airplane they could draw upon an established body of empirical knowledge about the properties of kites.” However, Parsons rejects the possibility of eliminating the epistemological problem because even if Designers “tinker with existing types [of artifacts], they tinker with them for use in novel contexts, or to do new things.” The epistemological problem of Design is not so easily done away with.

So, at this point of Parsons’s critical analysis it remains an open question to what extent the Modernist vision, as reconstructed by him, is feasible—whether it offers a workable solution to the epistemological problem. For the vision to do so, it must plausibly support the Designer’s confidence that a proposed novel artifact will fulfill the four criteria that the Modernists saw as the aims of good Design, according to Parsons: functionality, expression (of the Zeitgeist), aesthetic value, and mediation (of the human-to-world relationship). Arguably, functionality can be achieved via general principles, but does this ensure that the other criteria will be fulfilled automatically, as the Modernist vision has it? Expression of the Zeitgeist may be claimed, though not very convincingly, as we have seen. How will the Modernist vision fare when it comes to aesthetic value and mediation?

**Chapter 6, “Function, Form and Aesthetics” (pp. 103–128)**

Chapter 6 explores the Modernists’ postulated linkage between function and aesthetic value (beauty), which Parsons initially describes as the crucial Modernist idea “that when ‘Form follows Function’ the result will be beauty.”

The slogan “form follows function” attributed to architect Louis Sullivan postulates what Parsons calls a linkage between form and function. He seems to agree with critics of the slogan who maintain that, in general, there is no uniquely
determinable form of an artifact which is optimal with respect to (proper) function – perhaps except some purely technical artifacts. So, as he writes, “the under-determination of form by function no doubt complicates the picture for the Modernist.”

But given the way Parsons has reconstructed the Modernist vision, its feasibility as an antidote to the epistemological problem of design does not stand and fall with the truth of Sullivan’s slogan. Recall that Parsons’s rendition of the Modernist vision does not assume any strict function–form linkage – only the function–beauty, function–expression (considered in chapter 5), and function–mediation linkages. As Parsons puts it, even though form may not follow function, “perhaps the view that beauty can be realized through the pursuit of functionality can still be maintained.” This gives Parsons the opportunity to delve into the extensive literature on the nature of beauty, particularly in the context of design. The resulting survey would no doubt be excellent reading for a course on design aesthetics. It covers the notions of “functional beauty” and good and bad taste in design, among other topics.

But our focus is the feasibility of the Modernist vision, so let us consider the question whether or not the function–beauty linkage will work.

Seen from this vantage point, readers will find the most important topic in chapter 6 in the section titled “Functional Beauty.” It is quite a complex concept that relies on material introduced in earlier sections, but the basic idea is simple enough: the way an object’s form is related to its (proper) function may endow that object with a particular kind of beauty. This applies to a natural object – a bird’s wing, for example – as well as an artifact.

In support of this, let us take a brief look at Functional Beauty, a book Parsons published with Allen Carlson. In it, they write “some aesthetic qualities, not all, involve function, or to put the point another way, … Functional Beauty is one species of beauty, rather than beauty per se.” They say that the term is ambiguous between “beauty that emerges from function” and “beauty that is functional.” The latter might involve “a chair’s elegant curvature [that] fits with or contributes to its function by making for a comfortable seat.” What the authors have chosen to develop is the former notion – that of beauty emerging from function.

Drawing on his work with Allen Carlson, Parsons distinguishes four kinds of functional beauty. Suffice it to mention one here, for illustration – the aesthetic quality of “looking fit.” Things have this quality when their properties “are indicative of a high degree of functionality. Thus, for example, pickup trucks have a particular aesthetic that one can describe in terms of their looking suited to move heavy loads – looking ‘chunky’ and ‘muscular.’ The same sort of features would not be aesthetically pleasing in a different sort of vehicle (a hearse, or a sports car, say).”

Judging by this example, it is very plausible that there is some connection between function and beauty. But is it a “linkage” of the sort the Modernist vision postulates? No, not if we require that by virtue of the linkage, beauty follows automatically or “effortlessly” once one has taken care of function, or as a byproduct of doing so. In the case of the pickup truck, that clunky and muscular look is chosen deliberately by the designer. Similarly, the pointed shape of the smoke box door at the front of the locomotive in Figure 1 has little or nothing to do with its functional capacity for speed but arguably contributes to its “looking fit” for its purpose.

So, is the Modernist vision unfeasible after all? Yes – if we use a very strict and literal interpretation, it is. On the other hand, the functions of the pickup truck and the express loco might have led designers to intentionally select individual

71 I suppose the form (shape) of cogwheels, lenses, or turbine blades must be fairly strictly determined by the proper function (and the material) of those artifacts. But consider a fashion designer sketching an overcoat or a pair of trousers. The proper function of them would presumably be to cover the human body, keep it warm, and so forth – which would do very little to determine a form, at least concerning the crucial details. A huge range of form options are left open to the designer, to be decided upon through considerations of aesthetics, expression, and the price, plus the availability and provenance of materials, and so on.

72 Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 106.

73 Ibid., 106–107.


75 Ibid., 228.

76 Ibid., 231.

77 Ibid., 231–32. The example they attribute to Stephen Davies.


79 Beyond, perhaps, a certain sturdiness that the vital components need for the vehicle to carry heavy loads.
properties—chunkiness, pointiness—to make those vehicles “look fit” for their functions. This suggests that deliberately focusing on function helps the designer achieve functional beauty in the artifact. If so, the Modernists’ function–beauty linkage works after all—with a little help from the designer.80

Parsons reaches a verdict rather less charitable than mine. “The mere fact that a given Design is functional will not make it beautiful,” he says, and concludes his deliberation with “the pursuit of functionality will not always produce this sort of beauty, but there are instances in which it will.”81

Where does this leave the Modernist vision, I wonder? Giving it the benefit of the doubt, we might conclude that the function–beauty link generally works, though not entirely without effort on the part of the Designer.

Chapter 7, “Ethics” (pp. 129–151)
If we accept the above conclusion, the only thing required to reach a definite conclusion regarding the feasibility of the Modernist vision as a whole is a good argument showing that the last of its linkages will work—the tie between function and mediation.82

In chapter 7, the term “ethics” is mainly used in its broad philosophical sense, as referring to “a concern with the question of how one should live, or what a good human life consists in.”83 This includes, but is not limited to, questions about what rules of conduct one should abide by, and—of particular relevance to Design—what values one should pursue, or, in cases of value conflict, should prefer. Safety, for example, is a value that may conflict with the value of freedom, as in the case of seatbelt-linked ignition systems in automobiles; and security systems that effectively protect public safety may compromise privacy.84 Designers, whether aware of it or not, inevitably make decisions that may further certain values at the expense of others, as these examples illustrate. Another example would be a decision about whether to let the default print setting of a photocopier be “one-sided” or “two-sided,” which obviously affects the paper consumption and thus has implications for environmental sustainability.85

Thus, Design affects how we live in the world in many, often subtle ways. This is what the author calls mediation earlier in the book—the sense in which design shapes “a relation between human beings and the world.”86 In chapter 7, Parsons presents mediation as one aspect of the much broader subject of design ethics.

According to Parsons, the fact that much of design ethics is about paying attention to values and resolving value conflicts “has an important implication for the Modernist’s claim that purely functional Design will be ethically good Design. Clearly, this thesis cannot be maintained, if we consider the ethical values relevant to Design in the broadest sense,” because “highly functional Designs can negatively affect freedom, privacy, and other ethical values.”87 Here, I assume that by “will be ethically good Design” he means “will mediate the human–world relationship in an ethically sound manner.” If so, the passage quoted clearly expresses a skeptical stance towards the function–mediation linkage.

Parsons points out the possibility that some might take the function–mediation linkage to mean that purely functional design would “be beneficial in one respect, by combating wasteful consumerism.”88 For example, a levelheaded focus on function might prevent automobile Designers from redesigning their products year after year to stimulate environmentally harmful over-consumption. But, on the other hand, such focus would not halt unethical design behavior. It is entirely possible to design highly functional artifacts that are wasteful—Parsons submits the example of a leaf-blower—simply because they solve a problem that does not need solving.

So, for the Modernist function–mediation linkage to work against wasteful

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80 This argument applies to the “looking fit” version of functional beauty. I believe similar arguments in favor of the function–beauty linkage could be constructed with regard to the remaining three versions of functional beauty (Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 118–20). They may be achieved on the basis of functional considerations, though not always without a conscious effort on the part of the designer.

81 Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 120.

82 Provided we have accepted the somewhat shaky notion of Zeitgeist-expression as the sufficient manifestation of a link between function and expression.

83 Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 129.

84 Ibid., 133.


87 Ibid., 133, emphasis mine.

88 Ibid., emphasis original.
consumerism, it is necessary to Design selectively and promote functions that satisfy real needs, rather than mere wants. “The Modernist could then claim that functional Design that addresses needs leads to ethically Good Design [in other words, ‘mediates properly’], at least in the sense of reducing consumption,” which would be well aligned with the rejection of ornamentation advocated by Loos. 89

Of course, “the idea that Designers, or anyone for that matter, can pronounce about what counts as ‘genuine need’ invites objections.” 90 Parsons acknowledges this difficulty, but comes to the rescue of the Designer, stating that “claims about value can be mere prejudice but they can also be well thought out and grounded in good reasons. It is plainly not true that making judgments of value will lead to authoritarianism.” 91

Even so, the fact remains that a daunting responsibility befalls the Designer as an ethical decision maker—a theme Parsons takes up in the closing section of his chapter on ethics. As he puts it, “the question confronting the Designer is not simply the empirical question—will this device do what it is supposed to? 92—but rather the ethical question—should there be a device that does this?” And later, he asks “how is the Designer to decide … what things should do—what people truly need?”

Parsons considers various methodological approaches intended to relieve Designers of some of the burden of coping with these normative questions. He ends up suggesting that “if the Designer is not, or cannot be, an ethicist, the ethical dimension of her task should be handled by a distinct person, working in conjunction with the Designer.” 93 For example, “in the Design of health-care protocols … ‘qualified ethicists’ (usually philosophers)” are already employed. 94

As for the Modernist’s alleged function–mediation linkage, Parsons draws no definite conclusion as to its efficacy. However, from what I have summarized above, it is fairly clear that the Modernist optimism about an effortless resolution of broader ethical issues of Design, via a focus on function, is wishful thinking rather than a real possibility.

“Epilogue: The Meaning of Modernism” (pp. 152–153)

In his short concluding epilogue, Parsons focuses again on “the Modernist’s attempt to understand the significance of, and the prospects for, the Designer’s project,” which, as he says, “has been a theme throughout our investigation of Design.” 95 Given that the Modernist vision has been a recurring theme throughout the book and has given Parsons the opportunity to discuss much philosophical work on design, he has achieved the “systematic treatment” of such work that he envisioned at the outset. But what is the outcome of his “critical analysis” of Modernist ideas? 96

Earlier, I wondered whether the Modernist vision might be a feasible approach to Designing, in the sense of offering a workable solution to the epistemological problem. There is no clear-cut answer to this feasibility question in the Epilogue—nor elsewhere in the book—but there are hints at it, nevertheless. Parsons credits the Modernists for having brought into focus “the key issues of expression, function, aesthetics, and consumerism” 97 and arranging them in a system of connections. “While the Modernist’s ideas may not survive in their original form,” he says, “their investigations, more than any others, provide the point around which a true Philosophy of Design might crystallize.” 98 The last part of this remark reflects his interests as a philosopher, while the feasibility question probably reflects a more instrumental interest of mine, as a theorist of design—can designers use this? Even so, Parsons’s remark suggests a partially negative reply to my feasibility question, which is compatible with what I have suggested.

In sum, it appears that focusing on function may be a useful starting point for


See also the literature cited by Parsons in section 4.1 of The Philosophy of Design, 69–73.

Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 151.

For example, see Verbeek, What Things Do. In chapter 7, Parsons cites Verbeek among many other relevant items of literature. See also “Suggestions for Further Reading,” The Philosophy of Design, 172.


“Functional beauty” may to some extent ensue without too much effort, but ensuring a proper handling of expression and ethics (mediation) in Design requires a good deal more hard work—and Design theory—than the Modernists imagined. There is no easy solution to the epistemological problem of Design, although Modernist (rational) thinking might be worth considering in that connection.

A Modernist revival?

Reading Parsons’s cogent defense of Modernism in chapter 3, one might get the idea that perhaps we should seriously consider restoring Modernism to its former glory, or at least amending its shortcomings to see if we could adapt it to a contemporary context? So, as an extrapolation of Parsons’s critical analysis—and leaving aside the huge issue of the epistemological problem—let me briefly play with the idea of a Modernist revival in Design.

Given the partially negative reply to the feasibility question summarized above, and assuming one agrees with the Modernists—that function, beauty, expression, and ethics (mediation) are the key criteria of good Design, with function taking precedence—it follows that a feasible approach to future Design might grow from the Modernist vision. Indeed, this would be possible if we could overcome its two major shortcomings: (1) the weak linkage between function and expression, and (2) the lack of linkage between function and ethics.

Consider (1), function–expression. As Parsons showed in chapter 4, the Modernist hope was that a strict focus on function would enable the Designer somehow to express the Zeitgeist. This is even more problematic than Parsons suggested, for independent reasons. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the Modernists were right that their preoccupation with function and disregard for ornament would automatically lead to artifacts that expressed the Zeitgeist. Then, presumably, that would be the spirit of their time—the early twentieth century. Now suppose that today we began to practice the Modernist approach to Design. What Zeitgeist would we express—that of their time, or that of our own? In the first case, it would hardly be relevant any more. In the second case, how would we achieve novel results using the same Modernist method a hundred years later? Admittedly, designing for the function of selfie sticks, surveillance cameras, and other recently introduced gadgets may express the spirit of our times. But what “spirit” would Designers communicate via contemporary Designs for shoes, teapots, road signs, newspapers, and other kinds of artifacts that were also around in the heyday of Modernism? Stubbornly clinging to the idea of expressing the Zeitgeist leads to nowhere but trouble.

What matters for the contemporary Designer is making artifacts express what they are intended for. This may involve their functions, but also other aspects, such as easy maintenance, sustainable reuse of materials, the affordance of a good experience (which overlaps with aesthetics and ethics), and much more. In short, we need to master Design as a means of multiple kinds of communication. Judging from the existing literature, this goal has already been achieved to a considerable degree. But, it also seems fairly clear that there is no tie from function to expression which automatically ensures that an artifact communicates whatever it should, merely because we focus on its function.

Now consider (2), function–ethics. Similarly, attention to function is no shortcut to mastering the ethics of Design. Doing so takes a serious, conscious, well-informed effort that calls for a strong dedication to teaching Designers a practical application of ethical principles, and perhaps teamwork with qualified specialists in ethics, as Parsons suggests. We are not left to our own devices, however. There is considerable literature to provide us with the requisite concepts. The contemporary notion of “nudging” is remarkable as an overt attempt at “mediating” the “human–world relation,” but nudging without competent, ethical reflection
amounts to irresponsible manipulation.

More radical revisions of Modernism than what I have considered here are conceivable, of course. An obvious move would be to question the privileged role of function as the (only) starting point for Designing. This raises the question of the number and extent of the changes a revival of the Modernist idea could involve before the resulting approach to Design can no longer go by the name of “Modernism.” However, I would pragmatically suggest that we should not worry about that, but gratefully adopt whatever we can use from our Modernist heritage, and move on.

Discussion of Selected Issues

As Parsons admits on behalf of his profession, “philosophy tends to produce a range of plausible positions, each with merits and difficulties, rather than unequivocal results.” Philosophy asks questions such as “under what conditions is a counterfactual conditional statement true?” or “how much can a material object change and yet remain the same thing?” or, indeed, “what is design?” These questions cannot be settled by appealing to empirical evidence in the same robust way as questions typically asked in science. Consequently, philosophers have developed and refined a culture of competing “positions” that they test via the friendly fire of mutual criticism. Very seldom, however, is it possible to come up with knockdown arguments against particular positions, precisely because of the nature of the questions under debate. This means that several surviving but mutually incompatible positions tend to live on side by side.

As a user of philosophy for design research, I am regularly frustrated by the numerous competing positions about virtually any philosophical question I want to ask—what is knowledge, for example; what are properties; what does if mean; what does it mean for something to be possible? But in my present capacity as a reviewer of a book on philosophy, it comes in handy that philosophical positions and claims by their very nature invite critical commentary.

The philosophy of design — what and whence?

Parsons seeks to anticipate and dispel any confusion by making a distinction between design theory — some of which has been referred to misleadingly as “philosophy of design” in the literature — and what he takes to be philosophy of design proper. Design theory is primarily motivated by and focused on “the practice of design,” and questions posed by design theory are “driven and framed by current practical considerations in a way that those of philosophy are not,” Parsons contends. A philosophy of design, on the other hand, “would examine design, and its specific aims and problems, in light of the fundamental questions that philosophy examines: questions about knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, and the nature of reality.”

I find it more disputable when Parsons claims “there has not yet been a distinct field of inquiry called ‘the philosophy of design’.” This naturally depends on how one defines the term. The following passage would seem to come close to a definition that is quite compatible with the way Parsons himself presents the philosophy of design. It stems from a special issue of Design Studies published in 2002, dedicated to the theme “Philosophy of Design.”

“Rational reflection [on questions beyond the empirical realm], and the cultivation of such argumentative power and conceptual awareness as it takes, is the business of philosophy as I understand it. If we can agree on this, we can probably also agree on characterising the philosophy of design straightforwardly as the pursuit of insights about design by philosophical means.”

For a clear introduction to Kuhn and Lakatos, see Peter Godfrey-Smith, Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 75–135.

That frustration is tempered, though, by my conviction that such questions are important and must be approached. The only approach to them other than philosophy would be dogmatism. Philosophy is inherently rational—dogmatism is not—and rationality is a value to be cherished in research.

Parsons, The Philosophy of Design, 1.

Ibid., 1–2.

Ibid., 2.


This web document is an edited version of material from the editorial introduction to the special issue and the original call for papers, Per Galle, “Call for Papers: Special Issue on the Philosophy of Design,” Design Studies 21, no. 6 (2000): 607–10.


Even earlier, evidence of a nascent philosophy of design appeared in the proceedings of a conference held in La Clusaz, France, in July 2000, but tracing the origins of the field is difficult, so it would seem that no date, and no publication, clearly marks its inception.

As noted above, Parsons points out that “plenty of excellent philosophical work … on, or relevant to, design” has been done in various fields of philosophy. So the difficulty of tracing the origins of the philosophy of design is probably connected with difficulty in locating the relevant literature—there would seem to be much work that could be classified both as philosophy of design and as something else, such as philosophy of technology, or design methodology for example. But overcoming this difficulty is rather a matter of librarianship than of philosophy or design research, so I shall not pursue it here—nor indeed hold it against Parsons that he doesn’t.

**Essence and change**

On page 6, in a discussion that leads up to his philosophical definition of design, Parsons admits that formulating such definitions is controversial. He cites Jane Forsey, who “rejects the possibility of a philosophical definition, or essence, for design, on the grounds that design is a phenomenon that evolves historically.” Personally, I find it a difficult but fruitful exercise to try to develop increasingly better and more accurate definitions of “design” and other key terms used in our field. Such definitions serve as a basis for philosophy and theory of design alike, and I wholeheartedly side with Parsons against Forsey’s skeptical view on the matter.

As he says, “The fact that a phenomenon changes does not entail that it changes its essential properties: cars are faster than they were 80 years ago, but this would hardly be a reason to rethink our definition of ‘automobile.’”

Likewise, what changes about design is not the nature (the essential properties) of that activity itself, but the methods employed—such as introducing participatory design methods, or ethnographic observation of user behavior—and the range of things (artifacts) planned by designing. Nowadays, we solve problems by making plans for interactive computer games, surveillance cameras, selfie sticks, industrial robots, branding campaigns, and many other kinds of artifacts that were unknown a few generations back. Making such purposeful plans for a computer game, for example, fits Parsons’s definition just as well as did making purposeful plans for the engine of a paddle steamer, or for Queen Victoria’s wedding dress.

In recent years, it has become popular among some design theorists to talk about “the expanded design concept,” presumably for their discourse to accommodate rapid or significant developments in society. But for the reasons I have stated, I find this phrase more confusing than helpful for theorizing about developments in design practice or society at large. Fundamental concepts should be carefully chosen and defined with longevity in mind, in the manner Parsons does, particularly if they are to be useful for philosophizing and theorizing about a world in flux. If our concept of X—our concept of design, or artifact, or function, and so on—kept changing over time, how could we ever tell and understand the difference between an instance of X back then and an instance of X now?

**What exactly is the essence of design?**

So, I agree with Parsons that we can think fruitfully of design as having an essence—some relatively stable properties that can be adduced as its defining characteristics which the philosopher of design must disclose. But I have some minor reservations concerning the particular essence of design that Parsons proposes in his definition:

“Design is the intentional solution of a problem, by the creation of plans for a new sort of thing, where the plans would not be immediately seen, by a reasonable
Negating the highlighted portion of this statement to find a condition that should, presumably, be satisfied by a proper design case, we get:

not every reasonable person would immediately see that the plan is an inadequate solution.

and an equivalent reformulation of this would be:

not every reasonable person would immediately see the plan[s]  as an inadequate solution.

By standard rules of logic, this is equivalent to:

(1) some [at least one] reasonable person would not immediately see the plans as an inadequate solution.

So, given the immediate context of the definition, (1) is a correct reading of the last condition in Parsons’s definition.

On the other hand, it is also possible to read the phrase “a reasonable person” as “the typical reasonable person” — in other words, “most reasonable persons.” It may even be read as “any reasonable person” — in other words, “every reasonable person.” Under these readings, the condition assumes the forms (2) and (3), respectively:

(2) most reasonable people would not immediately see the plans as an inadequate solution.

(3) every reasonable person would not immediately see the plans as an inadequate solution.

So it would seem that there are three plausible but logically different readings of the non-inadequacy condition. Version (3) is stronger than (2), and version (2) is stronger than (1), where “stronger than” means “more restrictive than,” “excluding more cases than.”

This ambiguity may bother no one but nit-picking reviewers, and as I said, Parsons’s definition works all right for his book. Still, one may object — and this is my second reservation — that at times the non-inadequacy condition makes the definition rather non-operational, or difficult to apply to individual cases.

Consider a negative case, one that we do not want to count as design. Suppose someone named Jones made plans for a time machine as in the example Parsons discusses. Would Jones’s action be correctly dismissed by the definition as non-design, as Parsons claims it would?

According to reading (3), the answer is “yes,” since it would be easy to find one or more reasonable persons who would immediately see Jones’s plans as an inadequate solution to the problem they purport to solve. Condition (3) clearly comes out false.

According to reading (2), we might again find a number of reasonable persons who would immediately see Jones’s plans as inadequate; but for (2) to come out
false, as it should, half or more of all reasonable persons would have to see the plan as inadequate. And how could this be established?

According to reading (1)—the reading for which we found supporting evidence in the context of the definition—we would have to ask every reasonable person to make sure that all of them immediately saw the plans as inadequate. And only then would we know that (1) comes out false, as it should. But obviously, this is a hopelessly impractical procedure.

Now consider a positive case, one that we do want to count as design. We could think of Jonathan Ive planning out the iPod, which is used by Parsons as such a positive case. Would Ive’s planning be correctly deemed worthy of the label “design,” according to the definition, as it should?

According to reading (1), the answer is “yes.” It is easy to find a reasonable person who does not immediately reject the plan. Presumably, Jonathan Ive himself would take that point of view and be a reasonable person. And so the condition comes out true, as desired.

According to reading (2), for the condition to come out true, we would have to find more than half of all reasonable persons who would confirm that they did not immediately see the plans as inadequate—not exactly an easy task.

According to reading (3), we would have to ask every reasonable person to make sure that none of them immediately saw the plans as inadequate. Only thus could we establish that the condition comes out true, as desired. Clearly, this is an impractical procedure.

To sum up, this thought experiment involves a negative and a positive case, each considered in relation to all three readings of Parsons’s non-inadequacy condition. It provides some evidence in support of the conclusion that the definition is operational for negative cases only for reading (3), and that it is operational for positive cases only for reading (1). To be fair, however, Parsons does not promise that his definition will be operational in the sense considered here. I find it a virtue if a definition is operational—but once again, the one under consideration works for the book.

My third reservation about the definition concerns the fact that it is time-dependent. At one point in time, a reasonable person (living at that time) might not see a particular set of plans as inadequate for a given purpose, while at another time a reasonable person (living at that other time) might see the plans as inadequate. The perpetual motion device is a case in point. Over a century and a half ago, reasonable people took the possibility of such devices seriously, and sometimes even imagined that perpetual motion devices could carry out useful work. In our time, on the other hand, many reasonable people know that perpetual motion devices cannot work as intended. So, making plans for a perpetual motion device in the seventeenth or eighteenth century might well count as design, according to the definition (under any of its three readings). However, making the same plans today would not—except possibly under reading (1), if some reasonable person failed to have sufficient knowledge of physics to reject the plans.

Such time dependency of the outcome when applying the definition to identical or similar cases is not desirable—it does not accord with Parsons’s idea of a stable essence of the concept of design.

Parsons himself expands somewhat on his non-inadequacy condition. It is only intended to rule out “plans that are obviously inadequate in principle,” not “plans that are hopeless for practical reasons, such as time constraints, the expense involved, or the rarity of necessary materials.” I agree that a definition of design should leave room for failure. But why accept failure with regard to practical matters, and rule out inadequacy in principle? Or conversely, if the latter must be ruled out by definition, then why not rule out the former as well? To do so, one
could simply expand the third condition, somewhat like this: “... where the plans would not be immediately seen, by a reasonable person, as an inadequate solution in principle or practically.” This would rule out both a proposal for a perpetual motion device made by a person ignorant of physics, and a proposal for some excessively expensive bathroom (say), made by a person ignorant of the cost of fixtures, materials, and labor.

However, I am not suggesting Parsons should have done this. In my view, a philosophical definition of design should capture the essence of the concept, and nothing else. The properties of being good or poor are not part of the essence of design, since (I assume) there are different cases of what we want to call “design” which exhibit one, the other, and neither of these two properties.

What I am suggesting is that once we decide to proceed with a philosophical definition of design that captures some essence, then we can begin to consider the good/poor distinction as applied to cases that fall under the defined concept. In other words, we can then start to develop normative criteria to determine the goodness and poorness of such cases. To the extent ethical considerations are involved, developing such criteria may still be a matter of philosophy of design. But just as much, or even more, distinguishing good from poor design may be a matter of design theory—and the empirical question of the extent to which a given case is “good” or “poor” with respect to given criteria certainly is.124

The design/Design distinction and the epistemological problem

Reflecting on his definition of design, Parsons worries that it is too inclusive because it also comprises the planning-activities of people we do not usually call “designers.” As he says, “how are we to account for the linguistic fact [...] that Madison, Einstein and your plumber [all of whom design in the sense of the definition] are not called ‘designers’, whereas Eames, Ive and Starck are?”125

Considering this problem, Parsons quickly gives up adding further conditions to the definition itself, so as to narrow down the class of activities it captures. Instead, he ends up accepting it as a definition of “design” (spelled with a lowercase d), understood as a broad class of rather generic cognitive activities. And then, within this class, he seeks to delimit a subclass, named “Design” (spelled with an uppercase D), including only the design activities of “Designers” such as Ives and Eames, whom we do not hesitate to call “designers.”

I suspect—and this is a mere guess, since it is not explicitly stated in the book—that this move has little or nothing to do with Parsons’s deep interest in the “linguistic fact” that what people like presidents, inventors, and plumbers do is not called design.126 What I think is his real motivation for introducing the design/Design distinction is to focus exclusively on Design, to prepare the ground for the important idea he advances later on in the book—namely, that the Modernist approach to Designing127 promises a solution to “the epistemological problem.”128

Presumably, Modernist ideas were, and perhaps still are, at work in the practices of Design that include architectural and industrial design, among other disciplines—but not in other design practices, such as chemical and other kinds of engineering design, for example, or plumbing for that matter. Limiting the scope of inquiry in preparation for what is to follow on Modernism is a legitimate move, but one that nevertheless calls for two comments.

First, the epistemological problem is a problem pertaining to design in general, not only to design as practiced by people whom we traditionally call “designers.”129 So by limiting the scope of inquiry to Design, and treating the epistemological problem as a “difficulty for Design,” Parsons restricts himself to considering only a partial solution to the epistemological problem.130

Second, since limiting the scope of inquiry to Design is so important for
what Parsons wants to say about the Modernist approach to the epistemological problem, it is only natural that he wants to define or at least characterize his concept of Design in a systematic and principled way, simply because this would add to the theoretical elegance of his analyses of Modernist ideas. Unfortunately, as I have come to realize on a close re-reading of section 1.3, his attempt to systematize the design/Design distinction does not work. I will argue this point below.

Meanwhile, let me emphasize that this criticism is by no means fatal to the main line of reasoning presented in the book. A straightforward way to achieve the desired limitation of scope would have been to define the concept of Design simply by enumerating the kinds of design to be labeled “Design.” As you read the book, you can compile such a list for yourself (at least partially) based on the examples he offers.

The alleged characteristics of Design in particular as opposed to design in general

However, as noted above, Parsons makes an attempt at defining or characterizing his concept of Design in a more systematic and principled way.

He begins by posing the question “what makes certain people members of the Design profession or practice, as opposed to merely people engaging in the activity of design?” His response comes in two separate passages, namely

(1) “Design practice [stands apart] from design in general by its focus on conceiving, rather than constructing, the surfaces of primarily practical things;” and

(2) “The Designer attempts to create plans for the surface features of a novel device or process that will solve some primarily practical problem.”

I find this way of distinguishing Design from design unconvincing. Let me explain why.

According to Parsons’s definition of design, all design is about conceiving rather than constructing. The definition mentions “creation of plans for a new sort of thing” — that is conceiving — but says nothing about constructing anything according to those plans. And since Design is supposed to be a special kind of design, conceiving rather than constructing cannot be a distinctive feature of Design.

Furthermore, in my experience (mainly involving students and colleagues at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts), designers such as architects — whom Parsons would call “Designers” — admittedly do tend to conceive rather than construct buildings, for rather obvious reasons. However, fashion designers, graphic designers, game designers, production designers, furniture designers, and to some extent industrial designers, for example — all of whom Parsons would also label “Designers” — tend to construct as well as conceive the artifacts for which they are creating plans. At the very least, they build mock-ups or scale models or prototypes — indeed, they sometimes conceive by the very act of constructing. No one would deny them the privilege of being called professional (uppercase D) Designers once they have graduated. So, for this reason, too, we cannot use “conceiving, rather than constructing” as a distinctive feature of Design.

How about the alleged focus on “primarily practical things” as something characteristic of Designers? Parsons motivates this idea by contrasting the aim of Design with those of science and art. He says that “despite many differences, the arts and sciences seem to share the primary aim of enriching our understanding of the world rather than [aiming, as Design does, at] allowing us to change it.” He admits that a focus on practical function as a characteristic of Design may not fit very well in areas such as fashion or interior design, where aesthetic considerations may be stronger. Nevertheless, he insists, “beautiful rooms that one cannot live in, and beautiful clothes that cannot be worn may succeed as art, but not as Design.”

Even if we grant Parsons that, it would seem that all he can claim by this argument
is to have made a distinction between design on the one hand, and art and science on the other—not, as intended, between design and Design.

This leaves us with Parsons’s third and final proposal for a feature distinguishing Design from design: Design, but not the rest of design, is concerned with the surface features of novel devices. Parsons makes it clear that, in this context, “surface” involves “the way the object is used and the way it responds to use.”

“In other words,” he adds, “the Designer’s point of view on the object is that of the user,” along the lines of Krippendorff’s second-order understanding.

So far, so good. But then Parsons goes on to claim “only those components or aspects of the object that figure in the user’s relation to the object are the province of the Designer. This is in contrast to the perspective of the engineer....”

I highly doubt that my design students would sign a declaration to the effect that their focus is limited to the user’s relation to an artifact. Very often, they are interested in what makes things work technically, for example—as indeed they should be, if they want to be taken seriously as professionals.

Furthermore, and this is more important, it is easy to find examples of engineers—whom Parsons apparently denies the status of Designer—who are deeply concerned with “the user’s relation to the object.” Software engineers are a good example, as they are concerned with specifying use-cases and designing user interfaces for software applications. Other examples would include designers of maritime navigation systems and various pieces of equipment for the steering of ships—and what about designers of aircraft cockpits, or the complex control panels needed to operate power plants, railway systems, and high-tech medical equipment? On a daily basis, our lives depend on how well such engineering designers have handled “the user’s relation to the object.” Indeed, if these engineers are not Designers, then a focus on the user-object relationship cannot be used as a distinctive feature of Design.

The design/Design distinction, as expounded in The Philosophy of Design, simply does not hold water.

Conclusion
At the level of individual chapters and sections, Parsons’s book is illuminating and highly accessible. It covers a rich variety of design’s philosophical aspects, whose exposition makes for excellent course readings for design students. For example, it is easy to find suitable material for courses on the history, semiotics, aesthetics, and ethics of design.

Taken as a whole, however, as an original philosophical argument, the book is not as accessible as it might have been. It would have been easier to read if the structure of chapters 4 through 7 had clearly reflected the Modernist vision as reconstructed in chapter 3 and the critical analysis of it that Parsons promises in the Introduction. I believe that much of the same philosophical ground could have been covered in a more readable way if Parsons had used the critical analysis of the Modernist vision explicitly, as the backbone for the rest of the material. Instead, the reader has to pore over copious amounts of information not directly related to that analysis—information whose role in the book is not always clear beyond the book’s stated aim to bring it all together.

In fact, that is the only problem of substance that I have with this book. Admittedly, in the Discussion, I did take issue with Parsons’s definition of design and some other parts of the book. But critical though my discussions may be, they are far from fatal to the main line of reasoning that Parsons unfolds.

As the outcome of an ambitious and original piece of research, I find the book very successful. Parsons’s reconstruction of the Modernist vision and his account
of its historical background is impressive and eye opening. Very few books offer an “aha!” moment like the one chapter 3 gave me. His critical analysis of the Modernist vision—though at times difficult to tease out, as noted above—is insightful and well balanced. And all of this, of course, is much, much more nuanced than my outline could convey. The only way to do justice to Parsons’s book—and the deep “self-knowledge by proxy” that it generously offers—is by reading the book itself.