

**Book review****The Aesthetics of Imagination in Design  
by Mads Nygaard Folkmann. The MIT Press, 2013.**

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In my short presentation of the book, I will point at some important ideas that its author, Mads Nygaard Folkmann, discusses. I have tried to understand his theoretical objective and his proceeding in order to clarify the lines of thought. On the other hand, I will make some comments on a few conceptions that differ from the ones in the chapters of the book. My purpose is to show that other kinds of approaches may challenge his way of analyzing.

The structure of a book can often be discussed. How should the passages be arranged to guide the reader on her way, how can one follow the argumentation, what should be emphasized and opened more, what could have been left out? At times, I found myself reading the text eagerly following the narrative. However, at other times, explications about aims and various conceptual backgrounds were a bit bothersome. All in all, the chapters lay out the topic logically and the text runs fluently with only little repetition. Folkmann offers a broad palette of principal literature for his analyses, and he surely seems familiar with design discourses and contemporary design practices. It becomes clear that design objects affect our culture and contribute as agents in the formation of human experiences.

The title of the book promises the reader a contribution on a central topic in design, an insight into aesthetics in design. It seems to me a topic difficult to tackle. Not much about it has been articulated in spite of its importance. Hence, here is a chance to meet with a text that will look into it. Even more than aesthetics, the book is aiming at contributing “to the ongoing discussion about what design is, how it is created and how it operates within the many contexts where it is applied” (xvi). The book aims at covering quite a vast field. Folkmann includes in the design objects not only physical products, but also service and strategic design solutions, which point at organizational settings and, for example, the role of digital technology hidden inside an object. With

this far-reaching understanding of design in mind the book focuses on the concept “imagination” and aims at scrutinizing the imaginary in design. This key concept follows the reader throughout the text and with its help, Folkmann underlines the specific in design. Folkmann proposes a phenomenology of imagination in design. Design is conceived of as medium. A chair expresses and influences cultural meaning—and is a medium. The imaginative makes interpretation possible as well as the making of something new possible. It is the envisioning of the new. According to him, the imaginary power is in the consciousness of a designer and evident in actual design objects.

A whole chapter is dedicated to discussing aesthetics and this part resembles a textbook. Folkmann looks back at topics discussed in the Western history of philosophical aesthetics from Baumgarten and Kant onwards, reaching out to more recent texts on design. Folkmann argues that the aesthetic relationship takes place within an act of communication; the “message is sent off...to be perceived by a receiving subject in a certain way” (p. 31). He asks why some objects are regarded as aesthetic (p. 43), but has actually already answered the question a couple of pages earlier. Objects are simply seen “with an enhanced sense of the presence” (p. 41; with a reference to Seel, 2007).

To me the emphasis on the design object seems specifically inspiring. Material objects are always manifestations of a mental process that renders meaning dynamic (p. 151). By using the concepts of possibility and imaginary Folkmann states that objects are always more than mere materiality and “open up the possibility that lies hidden in the object, a latent aspect of its structure” (p. 23). The question, then, would be “how objects of design shape and condition experience” (p. 61). Folkmann argues for this approach in the whole chapter 8 of the book. The imaginary “should be understood as an inherent part

of the design object," the object contains imaginary meaning and thus produces meaning (pp. 139-140). The last function (or formulation) concerning meaning production seems difficult for me to accept. In my view, meaning formation happens rather in a relationship between the object and the perceiver/interpreter, when the latter produces meanings. As a matter of fact, an object cannot be capable of producing anything unless there is the sensing subject. My formulation would be that the object functions (in various ways), but it is the subject who produces in the two-way interaction. However, objects carry meanings, they can be called vehicles that convey meanings.

In the passage about the imaginary as representation, Folkmann relies on saussurean semiology and also on the ideas of Baudrillard. For my part, I have earlier conceived of this as problematic, and have turned towards the thoughts of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce, who offers another way and other useful concepts. My theoretical choice differs from Folkmann's also in his discussion about symbolism. Following Peirce again, I would say that a symbol as a reference relation is based on agreement. Therefore, I cannot know the meaning (connotations) of a symbol without knowing the content of the agreement. This conception seems more precise and, of course, it is more restricted than the one in Folkmann's discussion.

Also with regards to aesthetics, Folkmann's conception is wide-ranging. It comprises a broad avenue including creation and communication of meaning in design. In the beginning chapters of the book, he highlights important philosophical approaches to ground and clarify his discussion on this subject matter especially for design. Among the theoretical approaches especially Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological thinking is discussed (p. 34). Throughout the book Folkmann refers to ideas discussed by scholars and writers of the era of romanticism (e.g. pp. 68, 72, 109). Later on he introduces a design phenomenology, which is called postphenomenological, consequently with its starting point outside the subject (p. 187). Folkmann writes that design creates figurations or shapes of experience (p. 190).

Folkmann uses Verner Panton's design when he explicates the qualities of the specifically aesthetic perception. He argues that it is a certain intent way of looking, looking with an "enhanced sense of the present" (p. 41). Many of his examples are about chairs and sitting, which is understandable and useful. For most readers chairs surely are familiar design objects, which eases understanding.

Additionally, a light chair still has a distinct role in design education and design profession, because by designing the small chair the advanced student and a professional designer can demonstrate her mastery. Some of Folkmann's references, on the other hand, are a bit troubling in my view. That is when the theoretical claims derive from discussions about artworks and not explicitly about design products. Folkmann could have studied the problematic relationship between Fine Art and design objects in more depth. He briefly mentions that the term work of art can be replaced with design (p. 70).

Folkmann is familiar with much of the design writing that has been influential in design discourse since the Bauhaus and HfG Ulm, and in design research, which has been published, for example, in the journal *Design Issues*. In addition, he uses concrete design examples and has interviewed some designers and design groups in Scandinavia and Germany. All this helps his arguments to be conceived of as being embedded in design.

With the designer Ditte Hammerstrøm and an illustration (p. 126) he discusses the imaginative perspective to the whole or the detail, and to the known versus unknown, in the design process. The design approach of the French-American designer Raymond Loewy came to my mind when reading this passage. Folkmann's conception resembles Loewy's famous MAYA-curve (Most Advanced, Yet Acceptable). Design encourages and prolongs perception. Design puts forward a presence that stands out from everyday experience (p. 127). Folkmann introduces some core concepts aiming at clarifying designers' mental settings.

Accompanying his analyses, Folkmann illustrates double dichotomies in several figures. I am not sure that the figures help clarifying his line of thought. On the contrary, they seem to fix the process in a too static scheme. Mostly, though, Folkmann is very clear in his writing, which can be seen as a tremendous achievement, especially because of the complex topic he is interested in. However, a critical comment of mine concerns some long undulating sentences (including specifications in parenthesis, notes and sources). Of course, Folkmann aims at precise expression, tries to avoid misunderstandings and does not want to leave something out. Nonetheless, this style makes reading at times heavy. A list of figures would have helped give an overview of the chosen examples and figures.

In conclusion, it seems worthwhile to ask for whom the book is intended. Who should read it? Could it be incorporated in design education? In my view, the main ideas that emphasize imagination and the imaginary in design certainly are important topics for designers to be familiarized with. Also, it may be a good idea to discuss them in the multidisciplinary design team, where the reading may clarify the specific task of a designer. Discussions based on the reading would, in my view, need someone with insights in philosophy and who, thus, would be able to explicate the theoretical and historical argumentation, which is offered in the book.

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## REFERENCES

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