The Aesthetics Steps

Differentiated Approaches to Spatial Aesthetics

Tine R. Ebdrup,
   Design School Kolding

ABSTRACT

This article suggests applying several alternative perspectives and logics when working with spatial aesthetics in practice. The framework presented here—the Aesthetics Steps—is developed as a tool for reflection and dialogue in co-design processes with users concerning the role of aesthetics in knowledge and learning environments. By expanding the concept of aesthetics to include social meaning and social relations more discourses are created, which may further a more varied dialogue about the effects and purpose of aesthetics in this context. The framework consists of five steps comprising these possible discourses and logics. Through the steps, aesthetics becomes gradually more complex with an increased focus on the specific user group and its social and cultural contexts. The last step of the framework represents a relational aesthetic approach articulated by the art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud whose ideas about Relational Aesthetics are applied here to a spatial design context.

Keywords: aesthetic framework, aesthetic value, co-design, relational aesthetics, spatial aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a PhD project which developed tools and techniques for co-design processes with users/stakeholders in knowledge and learning environments (K&L environments). The co-design processes attempt to promote reflection and dialogue about the use of aesthetics in these environments and focus on how to create spatial aesthetic expressions relating to the specific context of the participants/users—how to reflect their values, norms, etc., as a group. These processes can be seen as initial steps furthering awareness about aesthetics prior to an (actual) interior design process. This awareness among the users can contribute to better qualified aesthetic choices and a continuous and more deliberate use of space and aesthetics in the users' everyday K&L environments.

The aim of this article is to highlight the possibility of adopting several options in terms of positions and logics when working with the use of aesthetics in K&L environments. By expanding the "common" understanding of spatial aesthetics as connected to beauty, harmony and the intangible term "good taste," several alternative discourses are created in which aesthetics can be verbalized and used in furthering a more differentiated dialogue about the effects and purpose of spatial aesthetics in K&L environments.

Based on these different logics I have created a framework—The Aesthetics Steps—which describes five different spatial aesthetical approaches. The framework has emerged from practice-based design research and the five logics stem from empirical studies such as observations, interviews, and co-design workshops with users (Ebdrup, 2012). The starting point of the Steps is an evolutionary-psychological perspective focusing on perception and survival as a basis of what individuals perceive as aesthetically appealing. The end point of the Steps is the notion of aesthetics as a social medium for a certain user group encompassing aesthetic value and relational aesthetics. The image of the Steps does not imply that step 1 is lower ranking than step 5; rather there is an increasing level of aesthetic complexity with each upward step.

The contribution of this article is a new cross-disciplinary framework that encompasses design aesthetics, philosophical aesthetics, and art theory unifying these usually divided aesthetic approaches. These theories derived from different aesthetic fields are used to explain the *logics* of the different steps. The exposition is neither a thorough presentation of the theories nor a theoretical discussion. On the contrary it is a proposal for managing the intangible and diverse concept of aesthetics in practice.

The article also contributes to the application of Relational Aesthetics (RA) in a design context. To my knowledge, this is a novel approach that encourages a change in the aesthetic focus when working with space and aesthetics. From a focus on "functional and comfortable designs" RA introduces a focus on the social relations that need to be established and supported by aesthetic expressions.

CURRENT PREVAILING AESTHETIC "DISCOURSES"

In the current knowledge and learning environments in Denmark, two approaches to and endeavors relating to spatial aesthetics prevail. They may even be categorized as two superior "discourses". One focuses almost exclusively on practical issues—functional tables and chairs, neutral colors, hard and smooth surfaces that are easy to clean, etc. I have named that approach *practical neutrality*. The other approach considers different sensuous impressions—application of colors, use of different tactile surfaces, etc., often in a harmonious but quite anonymous way. I have named that *comfortable and harmonious.* In the following sections I will start by trying to identify the background for these two "discourses," which represent the first two steps on the Aesthetics Steps (Figure 3). Subsequently I will suggest three other options of formulating aesthetics as an effective and expressive element in K&L environments. These three approaches make up the remaining steps in the Aesthetics Steps model.

STEP1: PRACTICAL NEUTRALITY

In Karl T. Ulrich's considerations concerning a theory of aesthetics in design he operates with two definitions of aesthetics, Evolutionary Aesthetics and Cultural Aesthetics (Ulrich, 2011). Evolutionary Aesthetics is based on the aesthetic judgment adaptations derived from a focus on survival, and in my search for the logic behind *practical neutrality* I turn to this psychological-evolutionary approach to aesthetics. According to this term we still evaluate our sensory impressions by adaptations evolved over the past 100.000 generations and even though "our most immediate aesthetic responses are vestigial" (Ulrich, 2011, p. 103), in a modern context they still control our aesthetic judgment and preferences. Through the adaptations, says Paul Hekkert, we have developed functions and psychological mechanisms which benefit our survival, and which we consequently try to maintain in our surroundings. "From these functions we can derive the aesthetic principle that explains why certain features in the world, in being functionally favorable, are aesthetically more pleasing than others" (Hekkert, 2006, p. 161). Hekkert believes that functional factors are very important for the aesthetic preferences of human beings and that we prefer to surround ourselves with patterns that organize our sensory impressions, as "they make us see that certain things belong together whereas others are unrelated, and they help us to make a most likely and economically efficient interpretation of the world out there. In short, they bring order in the flow of information" (Hekkert, 2006, p. 161).

Figure 1. Practical neutrality/primarily practical impression.

Photo: Tine Ebdrup

This means that we humans find pleasure in a sensory organization and context which enables us to act effectively—with a view to reproduction and survival. But preferably a minimal amount of resources and brain activity should be invested in the process. In Hekkert's view, this very desire to function quickly and effectively with the least amount of effort explains why we find the simple, neutral and functional environment more aesthetically pleasing than more complicated expressions and solutions.

This could explain why K&L environments in many contexts have given a lower priority to aesthetic impressions such as color, diversified materials, and idiom and thereby offer what I call *primarily practical impressions* (step 1, Figure 3). This term, *primarily practical impressions,* is supported by an observation from Noam Tractinsky and Dror Zmiris' study of user preference of "skin" as personification of entertainment applications. "The dimension of aesthetics that deals with orderliness was found to be highly correlated with usability" (Tractinsky & Zmiris, 2005, p. 416).

Based on a psychological-evolutionary perspective, the most important thing seems to be that a space is easily manageable in terms of perceived function and movement. If the users are uncertain about the purpose of the space or how to move and place themselves in it, they feel confused. Neutral colors contribute to creating a calm, non-confusing impression, which confirms this logic.

The office environment in Figure 1 is an example of such a practical expression. It is uniform in terms of colors, idiom and material. The colors are grayish; the idiom is square. The cut-out in the table even indicates where to sit at the table, excluding other options. The table is in an office with several desks, and the tables form straight rows clearly indicating where you are supposed to walk and sit. The materials are primarily smooth and hard. The room has a straightforward, functional expression clearly indicating what the purpose of the space is, and no confusion or uncertainty arises.

STEP 2: COMFORTABLE AND HARMONIOUS
The Danish brain scientist Kjeld Fredens does not think the practical impressions are enough. He believes that differentiated aesthetic impressions play an important role for the development of learning, cooperation and wellbeing. He says, "If

passive emotions are converted to active ones, people's activeness increases.....This furthers learning, increases memory, expands cooperation, and heightens happiness." He continues, "Aesthetics can raise your awareness and retain the possibility of converting passive emotions into active ones" (Fredens, 2003, p. 35). In other words, differentiated aesthetic impressions are required in order to support life in the K&L environments.

Donald Norman also emphasizes the importance of varied aesthetic impressions. He describes how, in the early days of computers, he did not cognitively see the advantage of a color monitor rather than a black & white one. Nonetheless, without quite realizing why, he did not want to abandon the color monitor once he had experienced it (Norman, 2002, p. 3). The reason may be that the addition of colors gave him a higher degree of pleasure when working on the computer, and Norman himself says, "pleasing things work better, are easier to learn, and produce a more harmonious result" (Norman, 2002, p. 4). So even if we, according to Hekkert, are attracted to simplicity and functionality, diverse sensuous

Figure 2. Comfortable and harmonious/diverse aesthetic impressions.

Photo: Tine Ebdrup

expressions are very important for our experience of things and spaces. Being surrounded by harmonious images is equally important for us. In his concept *optimal match* Hekkert further elaborates on this idea, emphasizing the importance of similarity in sensory impression: "ease of identification has survival value, we tend to prefer products that convey similar messages to all our senses. Consistency of impressions will lead to elevated identification accuracy" (Hekkert, 2006, p. 168).

In a spatial context you can say that in order for the users to feel comfortable within the spaces it is vital that the interior decor creates generally comfortable and harmonious impressions through their color combination and composition emitting concurrent signals. Such an example is depicted in Figure 2, a common area in a knowledge environment. The use of colors are diverse but clearly matching giving a pleasant color display in the large open room. Textiles and wood have been added which convey a feeling of warmth partly compensating for the coolness of the glass. This environment is designed to appeal to a broad group of employees, customers and other visitors, not merely to one specific user group. The diverse aesthetic impressions are meant to convey a comfortable and harmonious impression.

These two "discourses"—practical neutrality encompassing primarily practical impressions, and comfortable and harmonious created from diverse aesthetic impressions—constitute the first two steps on the Aesthetics Steps (see Figure 3).

As previously mentioned, the objective of the Aesthetics Steps is to broaden the concept of aesthetics by offering other possible aesthetic logics, i.e., ways in which aesthetics can be used in the design of K&L environments. The following section describes the logics behind the last three steps of the framework. These Steps can be related to the second concept in Ulrich's theory of aesthetics in design (mentioned in the practical neutrality paragraph on page 6.2)—Cultural Aesthetics. This term concerns aesthetic responses to symbols derived from learning and experience and also encompasses a focus on how social relations and cultural context influence the aesthetic preferences of people (Ulrich, 2011).

The last three steps are characterized by an increasing level of aesthetic complexity initiated by a gradually enhanced focus on the specific user groups and the importance of their common social and cultural context.
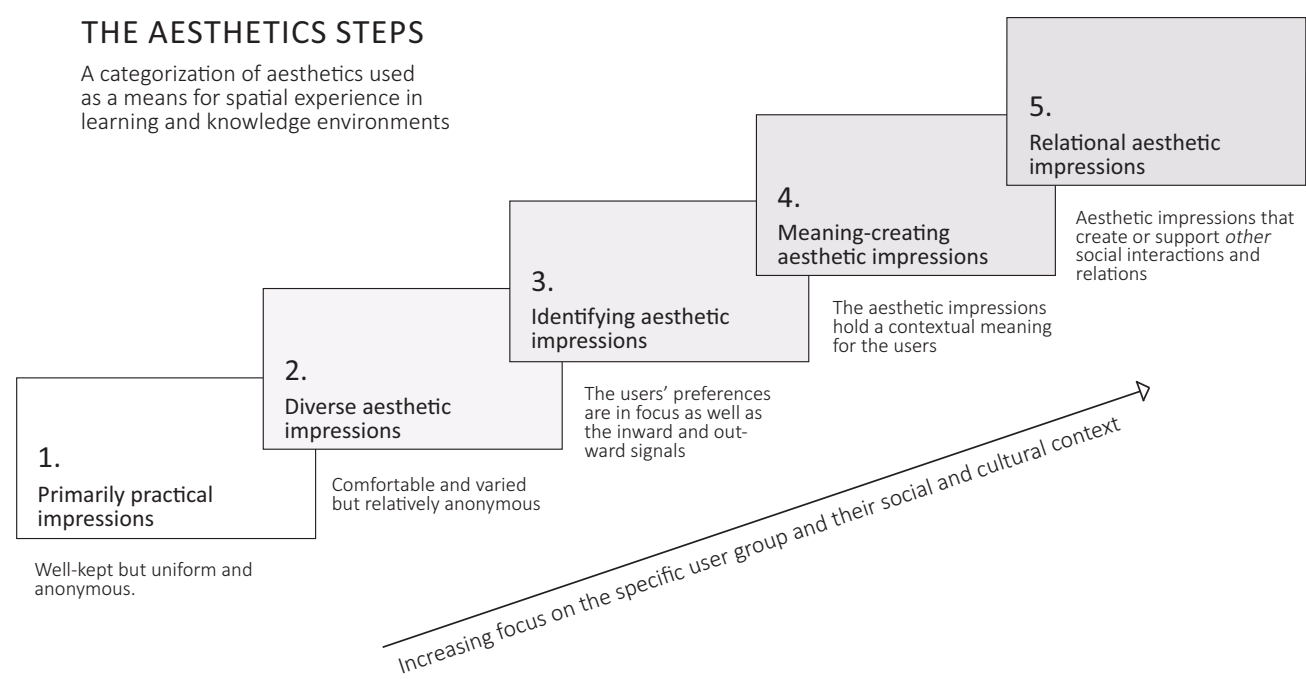
THE AESTHETICS STEPS

A categorization of aesthetics used as a means for spatial experience in learning and knowledge environments

1.
Primarily practical impressions

Well-kept but uniform and anonymous.

2.
Diverse aesthetic impressions

Comfortable and varied but relatively anonymous

3.
Identifying aesthetic impressions

The users' preferences are in focus as well as the inward and outward signals

4.
Meaning-creating aesthetic impressions

The aesthetic impressions hold a contextual meaning for the users

5.
Relational aesthetic impressions

Aesthetic impressions that create or support *other* social interactions and relations

Increasing focus on the specific user group and their social and cultural context

Figure 3. The Aesthetics Steps—a conceptual framework

A BROADENED AESTHETICS CONCEPT

Based on my observations in K&L environments and my workshops with users I think the two aesthetics "discourses" described above—practical neutrality and comfortable and harmonious—can be considered representatives of a widely accepted understanding of aesthetics in a spatial context. The spatial design is related to functionality, harmony, color scheme, and materials. It would be interesting to broaden the understanding of the concept of aesthetics to include one more dimension, where the aesthetic expressions can evolve from different layers of meaning which are important to the users' sense of identity and their social and cultural meaning and relations. This additional dimension creates other possible aesthetic and interior design discourses that can be applied in the K&L environments. These additional discourses not only focus on the knowledge of professionals about color schemes and composition, but also on the users' prior understanding, social and cultural background, situation and context, as important for the actual selection of aesthetic expressions. In this perspective aesthetics are used to create environments with which the users can identify and which, when in use, create a common social and cultural meaning; according to the architectural psychologist Rotraut Walden, this is vital for an optimal learning environment (Walden, 2009).

STEP 3

Noam Tractinsky and Dror Zmiri acknowledge that we humans have a strong attachment to the items we use or surround ourselves with and that we have an existential urge to personify our surroundings and create our own "world" (Tractinsky & Zmiri, 2005). Since this attachment, according to Walden, is a crucial aspect of the users' connection to the environments in which they are going to learn, knowledge-share and thrive, it is precisely the reason why users need to be involved in the design of their own K&L environments. It is important that they can identify with these environments and feel that they have assisted in creating them.

"Through user design, children and young people can express their identity and creativity, as well as demonstrating these to others [...] only this will allow them to feel connected to the spaces" (Walden, 2009, p. 99). Here Walden also emphasizes the importance of the extrovert role of the aesthetic expression/spatial design. It is vital to signal to whom the environment is targeted and create an interest and a sense of belonging for the individual user.

On this step the aesthetic expression in space is directed towards a specific user group. The focus on the comfortable and the harmonious fades away, and the aesthetic preferences and the context in which these users find themselves become the center of attention. The aesthetic expressions
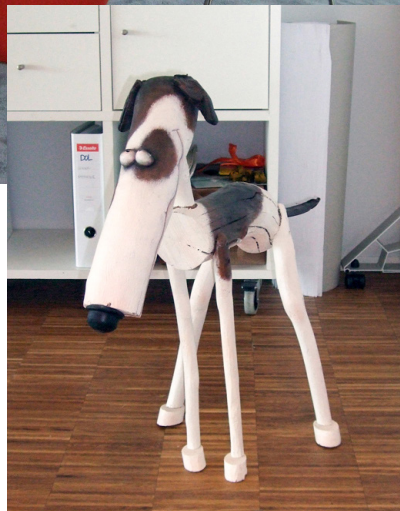

Figure 4. The coffee shop at Alto University, Art and Design.
Photos: Tine Ebdrup

Figure 5. Meaning creating animals.

Photos: Tine Ebdrup

in the youth club for children between 13 and 15 years of age, which make the users identify with the space, are fundamentally different from those used in a traditional law firm. The symbolic value of the aesthetic expression is of vital importance, since it presents a possibility to express oneself, one's social and cultural affiliation and status, or the desire for these (Tractinsky & Zmiri, 2005).

Tractinsky & Zmiri point out that professionals and users do not always agree on what constitutes good design, and it may be an advantage that users are not subject to the designer's aesthetic preferences and can influence the expressions with which they are surrounded.

Neither the practical nor the harmonious and generally pleasing are the major focal points on this step. Rather it allows the user to tune into the environment and recognize himself in it. This step is called identifying aesthetic impressions.

An example of such a space is the depicted coffee area at Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture in Helsinki, Finland (see Figure 4). A professor took the initiative to design a small common area for the design students. The kitchen elements for the area were purchased at Ikea. But since design students often prefer and identify with uneven and unusual expressions, an old work table top with burn marks and scratches—used for many years in one of the school's workshops—was chosen as a raw contrast to the smooth, general "Ikea-expression."

STEP 4
One thing is being surrounded with aesthetic expressions that one can identify with as a user on the immediate level. Another is to use aesthetics as a meaning-creating layer in a user group. Step 4 represents the notion that a foundation for a user group can be established through aesthetics, which goes beyond identifying—the idea that aesthetics itself and the aesthetic value which a user group attaches to certain aesthetic expressions can create or symbolize a deeper social meaning and appreciation in the group.

But where does this aesthetic value originate? The Danish philosopher Carsten Friberg believes that aesthetic value stems from fascination. He states: "Fascination comes into existence because what is fascinating is in accordance with our background, our experiences and life stories, which are part of our way of seeing, our sensibility, which guides our attention, in our habits and character, and in our impulsive ideas, reactions and actions. An issue which is supposed to capture our attention and fascinate us had better present itself in such a way that it corresponds with this background" (Friberg, 2006, p. 188). There has to be harmony between the issue and our understanding of the world and ourselves in order for us to attach value to it. But how does a user group decide what has aesthetic value in its social and cultural context? How is a conscious contextual aesthetic meaning created within the group?

Within the field of pragmatic linguistic philosophy context is defined as the way in which humans weave together a meaning (Søholm & Juhl, 2003). Consequently, a contextual aesthetic meaning develops and is constructed among people. That means that on this step it is necessary to look at the values of the user group and facilitate a collective weaving together of these values. This

Figure 6. Julie Tolentino, 'A True Story About Two People', House of World Cultures in Berlin in 2007.

Photo: Unknown

interweaving focuses on the social and aesthetic functions of spaces and environments rather than practical functions. Nathan Crilly writes about the social function: "Rather than depending on physical properties, these social functions depend on the collective understanding and agreement of the agents that make up the relevant community" (Crilly, 2010, p. 18). What is relevant is the collective understanding of what is aesthetically valuable and as Ulrich states, "ideas prevalent in a social environment influence the aesthetic preferences of individuals within that environment. Therefore when the environment differs, so do the aesthetic preferences" (Ulrich, 2011, p. 99).

Similar to Step 3 the users on this step have to be able to identify with the aesthetic impressions, but in addition the impressions have to support a deeper appreciation and value creation internally within the group. This can be facilitated in co-creation processes where you use different tools for reflection and dialogs to dig a little deeper and try to reveal the basis of the group's aesthetic

preferences. This results in the group becoming conscious of why these exact aesthetic impressions retain value for it. The very interweaving process—the meaning creation—becomes as important as the resulting aesthetic expressions.

In order to fully grasp this logic the role of the designer on this step has to expand to also include that of the process consultant whose job it is, through reflection and dialogue, to facilitate such processes where collective meaning is co-created in a user group (Moltke & Molly, 2009; Haslebo & Nielsen, 1997). Guiding this step is aesthetics as a tool to create a social meaning between people. One example is shown in Figure 5.

The reader should focus on the animals. They are made by an artist from processed recycled materials and belong to a consulting company where they decorate the walls and floors of its seminar spaces and its offices. These animals are woven into the company's history and occupy a special place among the employees. The animals symbolize the uneven, the unruly, the creative, which are part of their self-image. Coming from the outside one senses this as a signal value, but it is hard to appreciate the collective and social importance of the animals for the employees, since they are only relevant to them as a group.

The aesthetic value conveys a message among people. We influence each other in a mutual negotiation and create a reality which we believe reflect us and express our personality. Aesthetic value decides a deeper social meaning in a user group, and through aesthetic means it is possible

Figure 6a. Julie Tolentino, 'A True Story About Two People', House of World Cultures in Berlin in 2007.

Photo: Debra Levine

to design meaning-creating aesthetic expressions which possess a specific aesthetic value and importance for a user group. The animals can be considered as conveying meaning-creating aesthetic impressions for the employees of this company.

STEP 5
When a group realizes what aesthetic expressions are meaningful in everyday life as a sounding board for learning, knowledge sharing and wellbeing, it can start challenging these expressions by creating contrasts which lead to other encounters and social interactions. In this process the logic behind Relational Aesthetics (RA) is beneficial. Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational art as follows: "it creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the "communication zones" that are imposed upon us" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 16). He views relational art as an interstice and as a free area—a contrast to everyday life and its surroundings. Bourriaud believes that the role of the artworks is "to actually be ways of living and models of action with the existing real" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13). According to Bourriaud, art not only creates models for

actions, but also models for possible universes, arenas of exchange, where connections can be made between levels of reality otherwise isolated, through which micro-utopias are created supported by inter-human relations.

When the performance artist Julie Tolentino performs *A True Story About Two People* (see Figure 6 & 6a), she dances with changing partners from the audience for 24 hours in a small "space installation" in the foyer of the House of World Cultures in Berlin. She is blindfolded, emphasizing that the encounter with her dance partner is not a visual but a physical encounter. The encounter originates in the relations which the dance creates between her and her dance partner. Through this performance Tolentino offers an interstice, which means a possibility of creating an inter-human relation that differs from what the House of World Cultures normally presents. She creates a micro-utopia by establishing a space for a relation that might just as well be the truth about two people: another possible version of reality, which is true at that moment. The focus of this performance is on the creation of the relations between the two dancers and not on the space or the work

Figure 7. The Moroccan group room.

Photo: Tine Ebdrup

Figure 8. A regular group room.

Photo: Tine Ebdrup

per se, which is only created—or only attains substance and existence—when a member of the audience steps in as participant and co-creator.

Relational art often has a unifying and participatory objective which explores the relations between people rather than the work itself. The focus is what the work triggers in the audience. This shift of focus—from the actual work of art and the subjective experience of it—to the relations that the work engenders—is an interesting phenomenon to transfer to design of spaces. Is it possible to imagine this type of interstices in K&L environments where the design focuses not on a static, comfortable interior but on the best way to support and create the desired relations? Can micro-utopias be created where one steps out of everyday life and into a world of other forms of sociability where immediate communities can be established?

I believe this is possible, and one example is a group room (see Figure 7) in the seminar section of the above-mentioned consulting company (which in addition to consultancy conducts an extensive seminar business). The seminar area has several small rooms for group work, coaching and meetings, primarily targeted at the seminar participants' activities. Four of these rooms are designed by the employees themselves and have scenographic themes: The Forest Room, the Buddhist room, the Freud Room, and the Moroccan Room. They offer diverse aesthetic impressions and add a considerable contrast to the "regular" group rooms (see Figure 8). The theme room depicted is the Moroccan one.

It became clear to me after a personal meeting here that this room, through its form and expression, is an exchange area, which offers other models of sociability than the surrounding environment (see Figure 9). It was an informal meeting between seminar participants (I was one of them), but it was on the second day of the seminar, so we were not really acquainted with each other. After the meeting two things struck me as unusual.

First, that I immediately removed my shoes and sat down cross-legged on the couch. Second, that one of my fellow participants during the meeting lay down on the floor, even though he was the "game master" who facilitated the meeting. It is hard to imagine the same behavior in the regular group room next to the Moroccan one—shown in Figure 8.

Figure 9. Reconstruction of the meeting in the Moroccan room.

Photo: Tine Ebdrup

Due to the scenographic design of the room the user steps into another possible world, a micro-utopia allowing one to do things which will appear strange outside this arena of exchange. Other relations and inter-human interactions arise; you place yourself differently; relationships of power can be erased for the time being. Like in Tolentino's "dance installation" an interstice can emerge in the Moroccan room, a free area, which offers something different from the ordinary surrounding space. The logic of the fifth step offers a perspective of the role of aesthetics in knowledge and learning environments where the focus is on supporting and creating inter-human relations rather than expressing general harmony.

DISCUSSION

The Aesthetics Steps present five perspectives of aesthetics which have practical application in the design of K&L environments. The steps embody a steadily increasing, aesthetic complexity extending from what Ulrich calls Evolutionary Aesthetics—originating in human survival mechanisms—to Cultural Aesthetics, which is based on individual experiences, learning and cultural background as well as social affiliations.

When applying the Aesthetics Steps for reflection and dialogue in co-design processes in the K&L environment, users can be included in more concrete dialogs about the use of aesthetics as an effective means in their own social and physical context. The Steps enable the designer to introduce several aesthetic logics and perspectives, which "disturb" the users' own perception of aesthetics. This verbalization of aesthetics facilitates discussions of which aesthetic expressions are required in the participants' specific context and whether different logics are needed in different sections of a physical environment.

Mads Nygaard Folkmann has described a framework for evaluation of aesthetics in design, which, like the Aesthetics Steps, stretches from the neutral and practical to the more complex aesthetic expressions. Folkmann calls the extremities "Non-surplus in appearance" related to "functionality" and "Surplus in appearance" related to "aesthetics." These extreme points are the x-axis in a coordinate plane, where the y-axis goes from "Directly displaying the idea" to "Indirectly mediating the idea". This framework demonstrates "how an idea can be reflected in the design and how it can create a surplus of meaning" (Folkmann, 2010, p. 51). This *idea* (which

can be reflected through a design) is precisely the issue I want the users/stakeholders to embrace; how their specific ideas, based on their context, can be expressed in the physical environments and "create a surplus of meaning".

Folkmann's framework is, however, geared towards designers and their own designs or towards the evaluation of finished design products and makes the assumption that there is an idea to evaluate and come to a decision about. But the situation in many K&L environments is that there rarely is a supporting idea for the aesthetic initiatives. The spaces are often based on pure functionality rather than an idea and the users have to deal with "the rest of it" themselves. A framework like the Aesthetics Steps is useful in order to help verbalizing a supporting idea.

I have applied the Aesthetics Steps to three co-design processes in order to make the users reflect on and co-create the perceived concept behind a finished spatial design. The concrete examples of logics offered by the Aesthetics Steps proved useful as a basis for dialogs and reflection in these processes. The framework was used in different ways. The participants took the Aesthetics Steps back to their own work environment which they evaluated and mapped by means of the different steps. This gave the participants an opportunity to look at their own spaces and the objects, colors, materials, etc. within those spaces from another perspective. The Aesthetics Steps created a more diverse basis of reflection for how aesthetics could be an active element in their own context.

Subsequently the categories of the Steps were used as the horizontal axis in a matrix (see Figure 10); the vertical axis consisted of the concepts transformable/static, which were important in this context. The participants placed the environments they had explored in the matrix. Where on the Steps did they belong in their present form? Did they have a static or transformable expression? Subsequently we created a similar matrix where the participants, through dialogue and reflection, had to agree on where to position the same environments. This time the environments had to be placed where the participants found that they supported the group or department in the best possible way. Was there a need for formal meeting rooms or would the department be able to better express itself in some relational interstices?
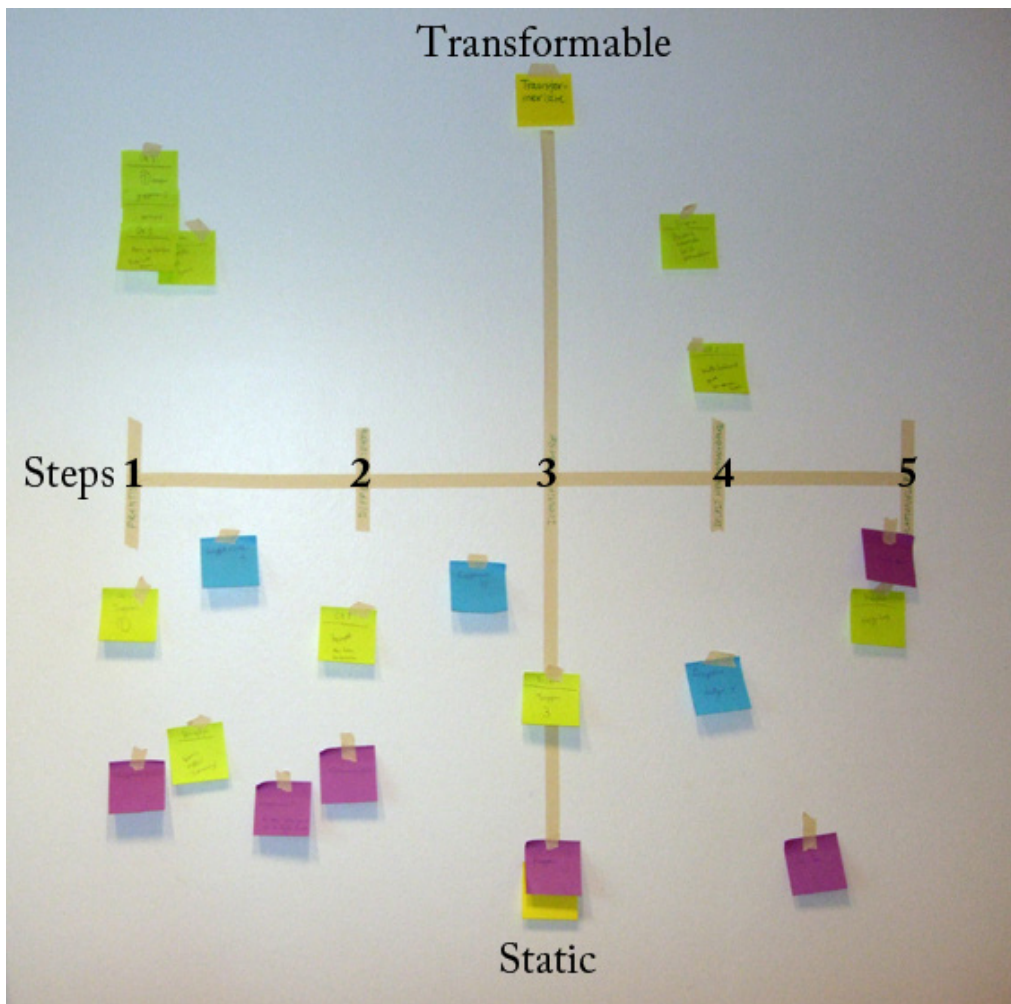
Figure 10. Matrix with the Aesthetics Steps categories as the horizontal axis and the concepts transformable /static as the vertical axis.

Photo: Tine Ebdrup

I concluded from the co-design processes that the five perspectives of the Steps and the reflections and dialogs resulting from working with them could be used to support and promote the idea on which a spatial design would be based.

The use of RA on the fifth step adds a perspective to spatial design where it is not the general aesthetic appeal that is significant but the expressive character of the form and its effect on individuals. Dhaval Vyas, Cristina M. Chisalita and Gerrit C. van der Veer propose a wider application of the concept of affordance, *Affordance in Interaction* (Vyas, Chisalita, & van der Veer, 2006). This expanded term advocates that affordance is not predefined properties and potentials but is created by the users' interaction with an artifact. They write, "From this view, affordances of an artifact are not the properties of the artifact but a relationship that is socially and culturally constructed between the users and the artifact in the lived world. This view strongly suggests that affordance emerges during a user's interaction with the environment" (Vyas et al., 2006, p. 92). Here, the concept of affordance also focuses on

the effect of the environment on people, but the main focus is on the relations between user and artifact. RA contributes to this concept by concentrating on the relations between individuals, relations which are initiated through the effect of objects, space and performance.

By applying this relational aesthetical approach it is possible to create interstices as intensified inter-human exchange areas, which differ from the surroundings by offering other spatial expressions in terms of visual and tactile qualities, and also in terms of possibilities of moving and placing oneself in the spaces. This approach to space and aesthetics may form the foundation for working actively with space in everyday life. Aesthetics in the K&L environments may also include temporary stagings which sustain and intensify an activity. In my opinion as a designer, this is an important contribution to the way designers can approach the concept of space and aesthetics in K&L environments. Using the RA approach creates a possibility for the designer to consider aesthetics and space as a means of supporting social interactions and relations rather than supporting

practical matters or harmonious expressions. The RA approach challenges the designer's way of working and offers entirely different options for the role that space can play within an organization or an educational institution.

CONCLUSION

Many knowledge and learning environments pay scant attention to the aesthetic dimension of the physical framework. In most places only practical needs (tables, chairs, etc.) are met, and it is up to the users themselves to make the most out of the interior design. The users are often unaware of aesthetics as an effective means in their environment and everyday life, and there is often no comprehensive idea behind the aesthetic expressions in K&L environments. Alternatively, a designer's or an architect's design concepts are evident, but that does not necessarily mean that the users and their specific context are taken into consideration.

In this article I have proposed a framework, the Aesthetics Steps, which has proven its relevance in creating dialogue and reflection in co-design processes with users. The purpose of these processes is to co-create a supporting idea which is a reflection of the user group. An idea they can identify with as a group and which adds meaning to their environments. Through the five steps, the concept of aesthetics has been broadened and aesthetic perspectives have been presented that stretch from an evolutionary-psychological logic (with a focus on functionality and transparency) to a relational aesthetic logic considering social interactions, which can be sustained and promoted through aesthetic expressions. A more differentiated starting point for a qualified position on aesthetics in K&L environments has been created.

REFERENCES

Bourriaud, Nicolas. (2002). *Relational aesthetics* (Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods, Trans.). Dijon: Les presses du reel. (Original work published 1998)

Crilly, Nathan. (2010). The roles that artefacts play: technical, social and aesthetic functions. *Design Studies, 31*(4), 311-344. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2010.04.002

Ebdrup, Tine. (2012). Relational aesthetics as a new approach for designing spatial aesthetic expressions in participatory design. Proceedings of the Design Research Society Biennial International Conference 2012 (Vol. 02, pp. 448-459). Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, 1st-5th July 2012.

Folkmann, Mads Nygaard. (2010). Evaluating aesthetics in design: A phenomenological approach. *Design Issues, 26*(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/desi.2010.26.1.40

Fredens, Kjeld. (2003). Interview. In Ulla Kjærvang (Ed.) Æstetik ja tak—en inspirationsbog om undervisningsmiljø (Aesthetics, yes please—an inspirational book about learning environments), pp. 34-39. Randers: Dansk Center for Undervisningsmiljø.

Friberg, Carsten. (2006). Æstetisk værdi, Det æstetiskes aktualitet (Aesthetic value, the relevance of aesthetics). København: Multivers.

Haslebo, Gitte & Nielsen, Kit Sanne. (1997). *Konsultation i organisationer—hvordan mennesker skaber ny mening.* (Consultation in organisations—how people create new meaning). København: Dansk Psykologisk Forlag.

Hekkert, Paul. (2006). Design Aesthetics: principles of pleasure in design. *Psychology Science*, Volume 48, p. 157-172

Moltke, Hanne V. & Molly, Asbjørn. (2009). Systemisk Coaching—En grundbog (Systemic Coaching—a basic reader), Psykologisk Forlag A/S.

Norman, Donald A. (2002). Emotion and Design: Attractive things work better. *Interactions Magazine, ix* (4), 36-42. https://doi.org/10.1145/543434.543435

Søholm, Thorkil Molly & Juhl, Andreas. (2003). *Den systemiske terapeut (The Systemic Therapist)*, Attractor kurser.

Tractinsky, Noam & Zmiri, Dror. (2005). Exploring Attributes of Skins as Potential Antecedents of Emotion in HCI. In P. Fishwick (Ed.) *Aesthetic Computing*, MIT Press.

Ulrich, Karl T. (2011). Chap. 7: Aesthetics in Design. In *Design: Creation of Artifacts in Society.* Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania. Available from: http://opim.wharton.upenn.edu/~ulrich/designbook.html

Vyas, Dhaval, Chisalita, Cristina M. & van der Veer, Gerrit C. (2006). *Affordance in Interaction,* Proceedings of the 13th European conference on Cognitive ergonomics: trust and control in complex socio-technical systems. Zurich, Switzerland, September 20-22, 2006.

Walden, Rotraut. (2009). Schools for the Future. Design Proposals from Architectural Psychology. Cambridge, MA; Göttingen, Germany: Hogrefe & Huber.

Debra Levine's photo is from: http://performanceartworld.wordpress.com/2010/06/20/julie-tolentino/

CORRESPONDENCE

Tine R. Ebdrup,
Design School Kolding,
Ågade 10, Kolding, Denmark
E-mail: tine@rumogliv.dk