

Book Review: The Philosophy of Design by Glenn Parsons

*In **The Philosophy of Design**, Glenn Parsons provides a well-structured discussion of the philosophy of design, drawing upon his extensive work on beauty, aesthetics and nature. The book shows design as a valid and important area of philosophical inquiry, covering a range of social, epistemological and ethical issues. Mona Sloane finds this an essential read for anyone looking for an engaging and accessible mapping of existing philosophical scholarship on design.*

***The Philosophy of Design*. Glenn Parsons. Polity. 2015.**

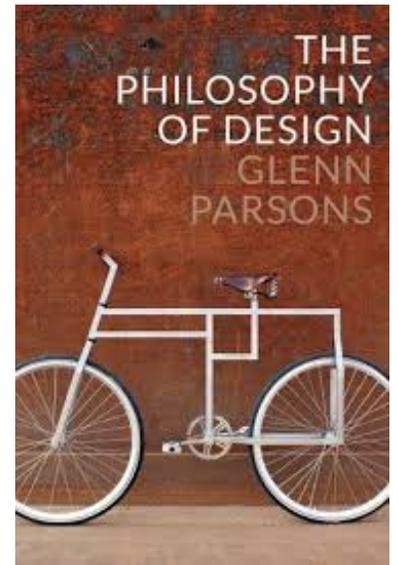
In recent years, the term 'design' has attracted increasing attention among academics and practitioners alike. While new sub-disciplines such as 'design anthropology' and 'innovation design' have emerged on the scholarly horizon, paradigms like 'design thinking' continue to conquer the business world. However, despite this growing presence of 'design' as both a mode of practice and scholarly focus, there has been little philosophical investigation and commentary on the phenomenon.

The single-authored book, *The Philosophy of Design*, by Glenn Parsons, Associate Professor in Philosophy at Ryerson University, Toronto, sets out to change that. It provides a well-structured discussion of the term 'design' from a philosophical standpoint, rooted in Parsons's extensive work on beauty, aesthetics and nature. It aims to demonstrate the significance of design as a relevant area of philosophical inquiry and therefore to map out the philosophical issues and questions that arise from contemporary design practice.

The book consists of seven chapters, starting with a brief introduction and ending with an epilogue (including a quite helpful page on suggested further reading). The narrative of the book first establishes a philosophical definition of 'design' in Chapter One, 'What is Design?', before then outlining how 'The Design Process' (Chapter Two) is one focused on problem solving. Here, Parsons elaborates on both the specificity of design problems as well as the role of the designer in solving them.

The second part of the book establishes 'Modernism' (Chapter Three) as a case study for further exploring the philosophical issues of 'Expression' (Chapter Four), 'The Concept of Function' (Chapter Five), 'Function, Form and Aesthetics' (Chapter Six) and 'Ethics' (Chapter Seven). Overall, Parsons discusses Modernism as design theory and practice, which is explicitly concerned with how we constitute the modern world and therefore reveals design as a fundamentally social process.

The book starts off strongly with the first chapter developing a definition of 'design' as 'social practice' with historical roots in the industrial revolution. Here, quite rightly, Parsons does not deny the extensive existing body of work in design theory, but clearly distinguishes a philosophical understanding of design from it: he states that while design theory focuses on theorising practical considerations in design, a 'philosophy of design' contextualises design practice with 'other important dimensions of human life' (2). Parsons's definition promotes an understanding of design as social practice that focuses on problem solving in and through *making plans*. This is an achievement beyond the discipline of philosophy as it opens up a window for an empirical investigation of how these social practices might be enacted in the contemporary design profession. For social science scholars interested in studying design, this provides an alternative route for theorising design practices from the empirical material, bottom-up as it were, and without a detour into the larger theoretical arguments that are not focused on design but



on larger societal issues.



Image Credit: (gigijin)

While Chapter Four and Chapter Five discuss ‘expression’ and ‘function’ as core concerns of Modernism that reflect the epistemological problems of design, Chapter Six provides an important and necessary discussion of ‘aesthetics’. Here, in analysing Modernist thought, Parsons makes the point that aesthetics in design are not only concerned with some form of objective beauty. In line with existing philosophical discussions of aesthetics (historical and contemporary), he promotes a relational understanding of aesthetics as both a mode of being in the world and the appreciation of ‘beauty’ – which can also derive from something being ‘functional’. This leads him to discuss aesthetics in the context of taste and as fundamental – and philosophical – aspects of design concerns.

Most importantly, Parsons ends his book with a chapter on ‘Ethics’, which rightly emphasises the importance of designers’ ethical considerations as consequential for our (material and immaterial) environment. Here, he starts off by outlining how Modernist thought promotes an understanding of ‘good’ design as ultimately ‘ethical’ design. Leading on from that, Parsons discusses how ethical considerations are integral to designing, which, by default, includes huge levels of complexity and compromise. In other words, he states that designers are constantly making decisions about what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ design, articulating different kinds of value (such as privacy, environmental sustainability or freedom of choice) and often prioritising them. He continues that this, then, is at odds with the Modernist claim of functional design as necessarily ethical design, simply because prioritising certain values (e.g. functionality) may negate others (e.g. freedom or privacy). Looking at contemporary design practice, Parsons discusses the difficulties of designers necessarily being moral agents and introduces new design approaches, such as participatory design (in which stakeholders participate in the design from the outset and thus become ‘designers’ themselves), as processes that can mediate ethical concerns.

The key strength of Parsons’s book is that it ‘does what it says on the tin’: it provides a strong philosophical analysis and approach to ‘design’. In that, it both emphasises design as social practice and investigates how key philosophical concerns, such as expression, function, aesthetics and ethics, are featured in these practices. This not only encourages further social research into these practices, but also provides a much needed framework for how we can explore creative practice and its link to society. In other words, Parsons successfully opens up a new and potentially interdisciplinary area of study by giving a comprehensive theoretical framework of design.

However, despite his own call to look at design as social practice, Parsons focuses on analysing works and arguments by other scholars. His discussion of Modernism as a philosophical approach to solving design problems breathes life into this notion, and is both necessary and important. However, it would have been equally, if not more, interesting to go beyond Modernism as a well-discussed, prime example of a well-articulated design theory and practice to spend some time thinking through the (philosophical) issues arising in twenty-first-century design, such as those relating to 'capitalism' or 'class'. Across disciplines, these themes are becoming increasingly important for design scholars and practitioners alike and it would have been intriguing to include this in a philosophical discussion of design.

Glenn Parsons's *The Philosophy of Design* will certainly be welcomed across the social science and design communities, both by scholars and by practitioners. It covers a lot of crucial theoretical ground and manifests the importance of 'design' as a worthy area of study and of equal importance as 'culture' or 'arts'. Parsons scores with his engaging writing that maps out and links up existing philosophical scholarship on design in a highly accessible way. For anyone interested in an intellectual engagement with design, this is an essential read.

Mona Sloane is a PhD student in the LSE Department of Sociology. She is an ethnographer and her research investigates the aesthetic economy of spatial design. She holds an LSE PhD scholarship, an MSc in Sociology from the LSE and a BA in Communication and Cultural Management from Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen. She also is a co-founder of the LSE-based research programme [Configuring Light/Staging the Social](#), which explores the role of light and lighting in everyday life and urban design. Mona works and publishes on the sociology of design, material culture, aesthetics and cultural economy as well as lighting design and public space. She can be contacted: m.sloane@lse.ac.uk

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books