

THE AESTHETICS OF GOVERNANCE: THOUGHTS ON DESIGNING (AND) POLITICS

Keith M. Murphy

There is some evidence that the word “good” in English is etymologically related to the word “gather”: the possible link suggests that goods, by definition, are things brought together, joined, and fit. Indeed, there is even a hint in the word’s meaning that all goods began as shared, common, and “public.” By contrast, “public goods” are today typically understood in the specific and limited sense of services offered by governments and other institutions—services that in some way benefit the “public,” both its individual members and as a whole. Whether provisioned through the public sector itself or outsourced through private contracts, these services constitute some of the most basic functions of government in modern times. The most obvious contemporary examples of these types of public goods are found in various forms of social welfare or public aid programs pursued by governments. They are thus most visible in highly developed welfare states, like the Nordic countries, where universal education, healthcare, and unemployment insurance are financed primarily through high rates of taxation, and administered largely through highly visible, mostly public institutions.¹

As opposed to direct provision, public aid may also take the form of subsidies for things like education, healthcare, public transportation, and home buying. Of course, not all such subsidies are really public in any direct or obvious sense. Government subsidies for already-profitable agribusiness or extraction industries, along with other forms of corporate welfare, for example, tend not to be among the best examples of public goods, even if they do lead to some beneficial trickle-down effects for a broader population, as supporters of these arrangements frequently claim.

¹ Note that this contemporary usage also contrasts with the way that “public goods” are discussed within classic economic theory—that is, as goods which are non-excludable (you can’t keep free riders from using them), and non-rivalrous (extra users don’t diminish the possibility that others can use them, too). Among non-naturally occurring goods in this sense, the classic example is a lighthouse: whether or not you have helped pay for its construction and operation, you will be able to use the lighthouse’s revolving lamp to steer your ship; and this use in no way impairs others’ ability to similarly benefit.

2 Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

3 Susan Greenhalgh, "Planned births, unplanned persons: 'Population' in the making of Chinese modernity," *American Ethnologist* Vol. 30, no. 2 (2003): 196-215; Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

4 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Definitions of what counts both as "good" and as "public" are varied and contingent—sliding in some extreme cases deeply into the realm of evil—but as an idea that has appeared across a vast range of cultural and historical contexts, "the good" has exercised power in having helped steer and justify various kinds of political action.

Public policy making itself may in some instances fall under the rubric of "public good," though not unproblematically. As Suzanne Mettler points out, much of the direct social benefit that governments offer their citizens is hidden away in policies and regulations whose effects tend to be invisible in everyday life. She calls this condition the "submerged state," referring to the difficulty citizens often have in comprehending the actual role that governments play in fostering and maintaining public goods.² Although we may actually experience the benefits of public services, we often misrecognize them as pre-given aspects of reality rather than as outcomes of political intervention.

Institutions that provide public goods are, of course, not restricted to democratic regimes. They exist in practically any kind of contemporary state, including democratic republics, socialist republics, monarchies, and other political forms. The differences primarily involve the degree to which these institutions and the work they do are actually accountable to the publics they ostensibly serve. But beyond distinctions among types of government, what is most interesting and important about public goods is not that they are either "public" or "goods," but rather the constitutive relationships that obtain between particular "goods" and the "publics" they help to elicit or craft. The implementation of public goods, in other words, is always a dynamic process: the ways in which goods are specified and brought into being by states helps give shape to different publics—publics that themselves look

"good" to state interests—and at the same time various publics strive to interface with states, through the goods (services) to which the states grant them access.

This is where the potential bearing of design on the articulation of public goods becomes evident. Indeed, in its concern with shaping "good" publics, governance in general can itself be considered a kind of design. The materials, processes, and tools, as well as the historical trajectories out of which the various contemporary design disciplines and modern statecraft have respectively emerged, are obviously different.

But some elective affinities subsist between designing and governing—affinities that are interesting especially in light of both fields' ostensible commitment to somehow fostering and promoting some version of "the good."

Of course there are indefinitely many ways to define, and pursue, political goals. One can point to population control policies,³ environmental planning,⁴ social hygiene and eugenics movements, and the cultivation of productive workers,

consumers, and taxpayers as different examples in which some conception of “the good” has motivated a government’s actions in crafting its public. Definitions of what counts both as “good” and as “public,” in other words, are varied and contingent—sliding in some extreme cases deeply into the realm of evil—but as an idea that has recognizably appeared across a vast range of cultural and historical contexts, “the good” has exercised undeniable power in having helped steer and justify various kinds of political action.

Thus, when we’re thinking about design and public goods in the context of progressive action, we must be careful about how we’re conceiving both social change and “good.” The idea of “social change” itself tends to be steeped in the language of left-leaning, progressive politics, but this can be misleading. For example, in recent years states including Texas, Wisconsin and Mississippi have passed legislation ostensibly intended to increase the safety of abortion procedures, but whose real purpose is widely considered to be a simple reduction in the de facto availability of abortion providers—and hence in the number of abortions performed in those states—through the imposition of onerous regulations that many abortion clinics will be unable to comply with, thus forcing them to shut down. These so-called TRAP (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers) laws clearly seek to redesign the healthcare landscape in these states, and represent, therefore, an effort to design social change—change that for many people does constitute an obvious good, but for many others, including many self-described progressives, is decidedly a change for the worse. The point is that we need to make sure that we don’t simply accept that something is “good” just because someone sees it as such. And exploring how designers and policy makers actually do their jobs can reveal quite a bit about how concepts like “the good” are locally organized and activated. Above all, we should strive to maintain a sensitivity for the ways that design, politics and “the good” are often mutually constitutive in particular contexts.

A helpful starting point is to think about governance as a field or set of conditions that are predisposed to incorporating design principles and motivations. Indeed, part of what I explore in my own work is how design and politics both help us to construct a sociomaterial world in which particular cultural values and political ideologies are rendered credible and sustained in everyday experience.⁵ In particular, I have examined some of the processes and practices through which everyday artifacts (like furniture and other household objects) have been made to “true” (in the sense of aligning) with welfare state politics in Sweden. What I try to show is that designers, objects and ideologies are all entangled in a web of historically contingent relations that collectively produce the objects of an ordered world, which

5 Keith M. Murphy, “A Cultural Geometry: Designing Political Things in Sweden,” *American Ethnologist* Vol. 40, no. 1 (2013): 118-131; Keith M. Murphy, *Swedish Design: An Ethnography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

Exploring how designers and policy makers actually do their jobs can reveal how concepts like “the good” are locally organized and activated.

6 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.

By giving intentional form to public policy initiatives, designers serve as “distributors of the sensible” in the lived social world.

semiotically “matches” (in Sweden’s case) social democratic politics. As noted, this overall process is highly visible and articulated in advanced welfare state countries, but I suspect that similar processes are at work in many contexts where design is a factor in the organization of daily life.

Jacques Rancière describes politics as the “distribution of the sensible”—that is, as the apportionment of perceivable “facts,” like things, times, spaces, and actions, such that access to those facts—and the particular ways they are, or can be, experienced—is unevenly allotted to different social groups.⁶ To be sure, this distribution is achieved through countless processes and practices, some of which are more

overtly “political” than others, and the effects of which are not always foreseen or planned. Yet amid all the complexity that attends the distribution of the sensible, I think that designers actually play quite a significant role—especially those who operate in or near the institutions charged with actually carrying out government policies. By giving intentional form to public policy initiatives, designers serve as “distributors of the sensible” in the lived social world. How

exactly this works is an ethnographic question—that is, one that shows the necessity for paying close attention to how design works in particular cases.

It is crucial to grasp the importance of form in design—especially in political contexts. Critics often describe contemporary design as less focused on form—supposedly an older, outmoded concern—than on process and transformation. The distinction is obviously overstated, since in fact, throughout its existence, design has concerned both form and transformation. Moreover, in the push to look at design in a contemporary light and tease out its emergent peculiarities, we mustn’t ignore some of design’s core, longstanding attributes. Form—which need not be material—matters because it is the most significant surface to which meaning adheres. To really understand the role of design in the production and distribution of public goods, we need to look at how actual forms of various sorts subsist alongside all sorts of other stuff.

Let me make a brief but relevant divergence here. My background is in linguistic anthropology, so for better or worse I often find myself turning to language as a way to understand all kinds of phenomena I encounter. And in this case I’ll turn to *registers*.

In sociolinguistics a “register” is a collection of linguistic forms that are linked, in culturally specific ways, to particular people, practices, values, and social roles. This collection of forms can be made up of certain words, or certain kinds of

The task that those of us who study the intersections of design, aesthetics, and politics are charged with is trying to figure out the complex role that design and designers play in distributing the sensible—that is, distributing what is experienced—thereby participating in the creation and provision of public goods in situated contexts of governance.

words, like slang terms associated with youth populations, or the jargon used in specific professional settings. A register might also be based in particular phonological features, for instance the simplification of consonant clusters common to baby talk (“tummy” for “stomach” and “choo-choo” for “train”), or the classic “r-less” character found in many East Coast working class dialects. Perhaps the most critical aspect of registers, though, regardless of the linguistic and cultural contexts in which they operate, is their capacity to create meaningful associations between identifiable linguistic forms and other specific, recognizable ideas, things, attitudes, kinds of people, and so on. The particular ways in which registers come to be—that is, how these links are forged, how certain bits and pieces of language come to be recognizably matched with particular culturally-inflected social values—is what linguistic anthropologist Asif Agha calls “enregisterment,” or “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms.”⁷

⁷ Asif Agha, “The social life of cultural value,” *Language & Communication* Vol. 23 (2003): 231.

I’m making this excursion into the terrain of language not because the specifics of linguistic register are necessarily relevant to design, but because I think the general concept of linguistic register exemplifies broader semiotic processes that play a significant role in how particular forms and particular social values have been brought together to help create a category called “design.” While the entanglements of form and value are quite conspicuous in the domain of language, processes of enregisterment—of linking values to forms—also underlie and in many instances help explain how design can acquire a status as something more than simply “making,” as leading to something other than mere things, and in particular, how design contributes to the construction of politically consequential public goods.

Using the concept of enregisterment to think about design offers a systematic way to examine design as a *process of aestheticization* extending across multiple socio-cultural domains: studios, boardrooms, homes, retail spaces, the public sphere,

mediascapes; but also in governing spaces, lobbying spaces and more. It's an approach that privileges neither form nor process nor meaning, but concentrates on the specific relationships that inhere between these aspects—how they are constructed, maintained, transformed, reinforced, torn apart, rebuilt, and so on. What this requires is sustained attention to forms and values, to patterned reactions to those forms and values, to the processes that stitch those forms and values together, and to the distributed consequences of those relations. Again, “forms” need not be material: they can also be forms of action, forms of thought, forms of affect, forms of interaction. They can be, as Wittgenstein would have it, forms of life: ways of being in the world that give meaning and structure to experience.

The task that those of us who study the intersections of design, aesthetics, and politics are charged with is trying to figure out the complex role that design and designers play in distributing the sensible—that is, distributing what is experienced—thereby participating in the creation and provision of public goods in situated contexts of governance. This research program is, of course, quite broad, and what we come up with will necessarily look different in different cases. But as a basic starting point we should look to processes that shape and emplace and enstructure bureaucratic regimes, including the structures and infrastructures necessary for the provision of public utilities; the processes, places and interactions of public services; and the language, documents and implementation schemes of public policy.