The Aesthetics of Management

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I'm

not a big fan of the 13th-century philosopher Thomas Aquinas, but I have to admit, when I first read *Ad pulcritudenum tria requiruntur integritas, consonantia, claritas,* I was right there with him. Roughly translated, he was saying beauty needs three qualities: integrity, harmony, and radiance. Integrity is the quality of standing out clearly from the background. Harmony is about how the parts relate to the whole. Radiance refers to the pleasure we feel when we experience it. And the language of beauty, as we've known since Aristotle, is aesthetics.

But what does aesthetics have to do with 21st-century business? Didn't it die out with the Medici? Isn't beauty in the eye of the beholder? Not so fast. If business today is about creating emotional ties with customers, then aesthetics is the superglue that binds them to your brand. When you understand integrity, you can increase strategic differentiation. When you understand harmony, you can optimize organizational synergy. When you understand radiance, you can enhance customer experience. You probably already have an unconscious grasp of aesthetic principles, but you can double their effectiveness by employing them deliberately and skillfully.

Some modern philosophers believe that beauty is universal, connecting our senses with deep evolutionary tides. Others say it's associative, drawing its power from ephemeral signals. My experience is that it's both. There are shapes, sounds, scents, juxtapositions, and patterns that push our emotional buttons no matter who we are, where we live, or what we believe in. And there are others that shift with each person's viewpoint or situation. The round proportions of a baby's face hold appeal for all of us, but the round proportions of VW Beetle may only hold appeal to those who belong to the Beetle tribe. The person who understands both types of beauty is a powerful ally, especially when competing against a field of me-too products, ho-hum services, and business-as-usual companies.

Aesthetics is alive and well. But we need to retrieve it from the mothballs and rediscover it's magic. The more technological our culture becomes, the more we need the sensual and metaphorical power of beauty.

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Renowned architect Moshe Safdie noted that, in nature, beauty is a by-product of function. The color and shape of a flower is derived from its need to attract insects. The color and structure of an insect is derived from its need to camouflage itself against flowers.

Often what makes a thing beautiful is our appreciation of its benefits. The blue sky is beautiful because it promises clean air. A muscular body is beautiful because it signals good health. An oak tree is beautiful because it offers shade, shelter, and food. By the same token, an Aston Martin is beautiful because it offers aerodynamic efficiency. An Aeron chair is beautiful because it offers exceptional comfort. Einstein's relativity theory is beautiful because it offers profound simplicity.

We ascribe beauty to things we admire, then we begin to admire other things that exhibit the same beauty. At first the Aeron chair was scoffed at for its "weird" look. Later, when its look became identified with comfort, people began to find it beautiful, and less discriminating people began seeking the same look in knock-off chairs, expecting to get the same comfort—and the same status— for a lower price. We often use beauty as a proxy for quality.

Buckminster Fuller once said, "When I'm working on a problem, I never think about beauty. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong." In mathematics, Poincare could judge the quality of a solution solely on its aesthetic elegance. Software developers can spot a great algorithm by the shape and efficiency of its coding lines. There's ample evidence of mathematical beauty in nature, too, including the breathtaking complexity of fractals, the surprising consilience of theories across disciplines, and the ancient sacred ratios in geometry.

Take the Fibonacci sequence. The formula is like a children's game: Each number in the sequence is the sum of the previous two, giving you a progression that looks like 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, and so on. It describes what Renaissance mathematicians called the golden spiral. In nature, this progression shows up in the patterns of pinecones and palm trees. It shows up in artichoke leaves and broccoli florets. It shows up in fingerprints, whirlpools, and the shape of the Milky Way. And it shows up in the shapes of nautilus shells, whose walls curve outward according to the same laws. A company called PAX has borrowed the golden spiral to reinvent the shape of fan blades. Guess what? Their fan blades are 15-30% more energy efficient, 50-75% quieter, and often cheaper to produce. This is beauty with its sleeves rolled up.

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Writing in his notebook, Leonardo da Vinci said that we "will never discover an invention more beautiful, easier, or more economical than nature's … In her inventions nothing is wanting and nothing is superfluous." Biomimicry expert Janine Benyus explains that nature designs its products using very few materials. Instead, it uses shape to create function. She notes that any natural material that looks like plastic is one of five simple polymers. Organisms are hungry for these polymers, so they go back into the ground cycle easily. In the manufacturing world, by contrast, we use 350 complex polymers, which is why recycling is so difficult. "The design challenge," she says, "is to learn how to shape them."

Klipsch Audio Technologies designs horn-loaded loudspeakers that draw inspiration from the shape of the human ear. This approach has led to speakers that can accurately produce both soft and loud sounds, produce a highly directional sound pattern, deliver unaccented bass, mid-range and treble ranges, and are highly efficient. Founder Paul Klipsch often said, "Quality is directly proportionate to efficiency."

Simplicity and efficiency are twin threads that run through the discipline of aesthetics. All living things have an instinct to economize. The efficient use of energy, materials, and food are the best defense against entropy, the tendency for all systems to lose energy. Since aesthetics is reinforced by simplicity and efficiency, it offers a powerful tool for thriving in an era of diminishing natural resources.

"It's amazing to watch the design mind work," says Benyus. "I can tell you how life works, and then a designer will take it and remake the world."

Okay. Everyone knows you can apply aesthetics to the curve of a fender, or the typography of a web page, or the textures in a clothing line. But it can be even more effective when you apply it to decision-making, upstream strategy, or organizational change. When you use the principles of aesthetics to address wicked problems, you can more easily navigate through the fog of complexity. Aesthetics confers a kind of visibility.

Let's look at a few of the principles that artists have used successfully, and see how they might apply to management:

Shape. Painters often squint at their work to separate objects from the surrounding field. By getting a good read on the edges of things, they can better focus the viewer's attention. Perceptual psychologists call this phenomenon figure and ground. In management, figure and ground can help you separate the real issues from the red herrings. What's the problem we're trying to solve? Where do we draw the edges of our business? How can we separate ourselves from the competition?

Line. A line is a simple device to connect one thing with another—to lead a viewer's eye, a listener's ear, or a reader's thoughts from point A to point B. It creates a sense of trajectory that suggests motion. Where is our company headed? How do our products and services connect? What does this year's performance say about next year's? If the connections among decisions, products, and events are not clearly delineated, your sense of aesthetics will reveal the problem before the market does.

Texture. In all forms of art, texture is used to organize complexity and add depth. The composer overlaps chords and melodies to wrap the listener in layers of sound. An artist layers brushstroke over brushstroke to create the intrigue of visual detail. The novelist weaves a spell by threading together plots, subplots, dialogue, and description. Texture is a fact of life, for better or worse, in every company. How can we thread together our businesses, processes, brands, products, features, and communications to create a tapestry instead of a train wreck? How can we organize complexity to give it resonance?

Scale. Every artist knows that large scale is the shortcut to shattering power. It's not just whimsy that inspired sculptor Claes Oldenburg to take a wooden clothespin and scale it up to the size of a building. Picasso knew exactly what he was doing when he painted Guernica on a mural-sized canvas. When Beethoven needed to confront the huge themes of day, he scaled up the orchestra and moved the center of gravity down to the level of cello to get a fuller, darker sound. But scale can also mean

small scale. How big must our business be to beat the competition and serve our customers? Where should we upscale? Where should we downscale? What are we doing today that, by increasing our investment in it, would give us a competitive edge or a decisive victory?

Proportion. The principle of proportion weighs the relationship of one element to another. Artists of all kinds grapple with this issue, but so do business leaders. It's a question of balance. How should the various parts of our business relate to each other? When is it strategically sound to be out of balance? How do we know if we're investing the right amounts in the right innovations? When we make a decision, how should we give weight to conflicting concerns so we don't throw the baby out with the bath water? By developing a corporate sense of proportion, these judgments get easier.

Variety. With large-scale artworks, such as symphonies, movies, novels, buildings, and towns, it's variety that holds people's interest. In time-based experiences, this also implies pacing. Variety and pacing make it possible to sit though a three-hour movie without checking our watches. Variety in systems performs a different function. It gives the system enough complexity to correct itself and stay healthy. How can variety help us create a culture of perpetual innovation? How can we use it to spread our exposure to risk? How can we use pacing to keep our customers on the edge of their seats, wondering what delights we'll prepare for them next?

Rhythm. Of course, rhythm is essential in music. But it crosses over into other art forms as well. Renaissance architect Leone Battista Alberti recommended the use of musical intervals for the pleasing design of buildings. Sony CEO Howard Stringer expects the "rhythm of innovation" to restore the company to its former glory. What kind of rhythm is right for our company? When should we release our new products? How should we change speeds to harness a good economy? A bad economy?

Depth. Shakespeare understood the market-maximizing power of depth. His plays communicated to every level of audience, from the royals sitting in the top-tier boxes to the groundlings standing in the ale-and-urine-soaked sawdust. His dialogue would shift rhythmically from high philosophy to low humor; his action would alternate between soliloquies and sword fights. Did the strategy produce profits? It seems likely, since at the end of his career he owned the biggest house in London. Yet the principle of depth can be applied with equal success to businesses and brands. The diagram opposite shows how each part of the business, from the internal vision to the external brand, can operate at multiple levels of understanding. Are we communicating our mission and message to every audience? How about our product stories? Do they resonate across regions, segments, and cultures?

Harmony. Harmony is based on the principle of synergy, or how the parts work together to do more than they could do separately. In music, it might be how the notes sound together. In painting, how the colors look together. In cuisine, how the flavors taste together. In business, it's how people work together. How can we achieve synergy among functions, departments, and divisions? How can we remove dissonance and emphasize alignment? How can we get a complex organization to execute a simple idea?

Contrast. In business, cash is king. In aesthetics, it's contrast. Contrast gives artists a way to create drama. Big vs. small, dark vs. light, loud vs. soft, fast vs. slow, straight vs. curved, smooth vs. rough, old vs. new, and so on. It's contrast that makes art both emotional and memorable. When a company creates vivid differentiation between itself and its competitors, it's using the principle of contrast. Avis vs. Hertz. Mini vs. Hummer. Tom's Natural vs. Crest. How can we increase the contrast between our brand and those of our competitors? How can we design our products and services so they stand out in a crowded marketplace? How can we make sure that our communications hook into in people's minds like Velcro?

I could go on, but that's another manifesto. Suffice it to say that the best management decisions are also aesthetic decisions: They satisfy our deep intuitive sense of what's right, what's good, and what's beautiful. Aesthetics serve as a compass to keep you from getting lost as you design the way forward. What is good design? This is the question that has haunted the design community for decades. Whenever the conversation comes up, the "eye of the beholder" argument shuts it down. Someone says that good design is design that "works," and someone else adds that the arbiter of "what works" is the individual user. At this point everyone nods and the conversation ends. But the question is never fully put to rest.

I believe there's a more universal answer. It's this: Good design does not depend so much on the eye of the beholder, but on a combination of aesthetics and ethics. Good design is design that exhibits virtues. What virtues? You know, good old human virtues like generosity, courage, diligence, honesty, substance, clarity, curiosity, thriftiness, helpfulness, and wit. By contrast, bad design exhibits human vices like selfishness, fear, laziness, deceit, pettiness, confusion, apathy, wastefulness, harmfulness, and stupidity. In other words, we want the same things from design that we want from our fellow humans. When we combine ethical virtues with aesthetic virtues, we get good design.

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The ancient Greeks framed this ideal in the context of knowing, making, and doing: "To know truth. To make beauty. To do good." Apple's Steve Jobs framed it this way: "Design is the soul of a man-made creation."

Soul, like beauty, is one of those evanescent qualities that disappears under the microscope, but it's clearly visible when you meet it on the street. It's a quality that's been missing in a 20th-century business tradition that overvalues narrow, short-term success, and undervalues broad, long-term success. Sumantra Ghoshal, a global business leader and author, called corporate business "under-socialized and one-dimensional." He said that spreadsheet management has only led to resentful customers, dispirited employees, and a divided society.

Why would this change? Because it has to. In an era when customers are not only omnipotent but omniscient, when over-production leads to an ecological box canyon, a selfish focus on the bottom line is bad design. Good design, in contrast, is a new management model that deliberately includes a moral dimension. It's a model that not only serves shareholders but employees, customers, part-ners, and communities. For the first time since the Industrial Age, successful businesses will be designful businesses. They'll combine knowing, making, and doing to strive for truth, beauty, and the public good. At last, the bottom line will begin to trace the shape of who we want to be. ▪
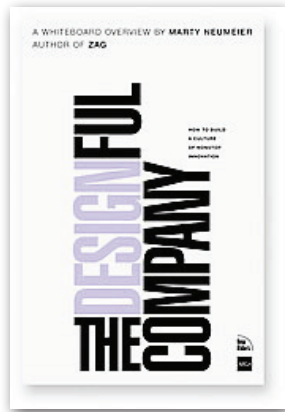
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