

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**Aesthetic Values in Furniture Design:
Ethnography of Ten Middle Class Young
Families in Tehran (Iran)**

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Introduction

Aesthetics is always appreciated by humankind (McGann,2004). Researching aesthetics and its different aspects is essential in design process. Amongst different aspect of aesthetics, aesthetic value is actually much complex and ignored by designers. It is ignored because designers don't aware of its function and it doesn't teach at art and design faculties. By encountering globalization, aesthetic values get an important role in locally design procedures. Designers who are aware of user's trends and taste will be more successful at the comparative product's market. Besides, usually aesthetic values are mistaken by designers as the important role of aesthetics and its values. In the other word they do not consider them as one of social values and when they want to describe these values they talk about the benefit of aesthetic approach in design process. In this research I tried to define this aspect of aesthetics in a way to be used practically by designers. Hence, a few definitions would be come to consider and with the aid of some methods I tried to define aesthetic values of a sample group. The sample groups were 10 young Iranian families with a same lifestyle. They were educated and from middle class.

However, the main question in this research would be “How are the aesthetic values in the furniture among young educated middle class lifestyles in Tehran?”

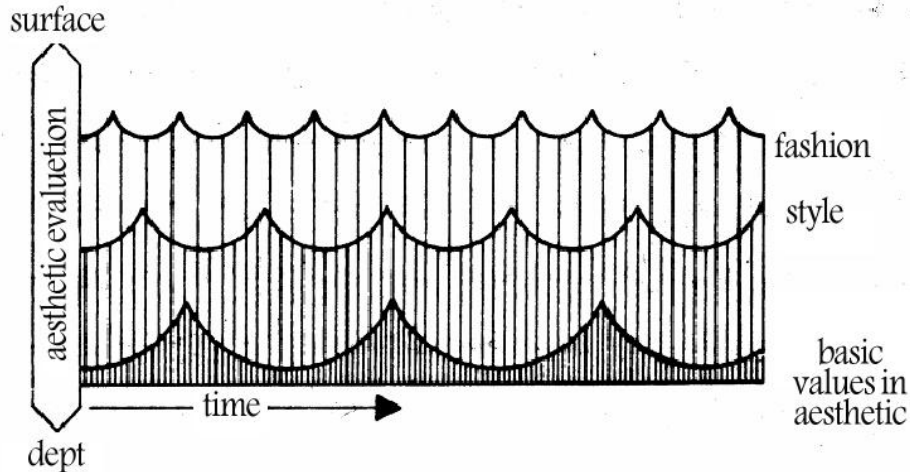
And for answering this question we should first of all have a definition of aesthetic values.

Aesthetic Values

In on-line Thesaurus dictionary “aesthetic value” is described as “objective or subjective principles and standards related to human preferences among, or assessments of, artistic forms and qualities (in music, literature, visual arts, etc.) or objects and events in nature -- sometimes includes precepts of non-perceptible (e.g., moral or intellectual) beauty” (online Thesaurus dictionary). From this definition we can understand that aesthetic values are related to the human preferences. As these preferences have not equivalent and similar importance for individuals, so they are hierarchical.

Peter Smith mentioned three levels for aesthetic values. He associated the situation with the waves in the ocean. At the surface we see enormous waves with high amplitude and short wavelength. Underneath of these waves, there are huge waves that carry upper waves. In dept of the ocean we see huge amounts of water that have very unnoticeable

movements and the upper movements have no influence on them. He assimilated the upper movements with fashion, that change so fast during a time, the middle level with style, that have deeper route and do not change as fast as fashion movements and finally the deepest level with basic aesthetic values in a society, that have their routes in the deepest attitudes, believes and cultural thoughts of the society members and society groups (Grouter, p96).



According to David Novitz (professor of philosophy in university of Canterbury) far from being untouched by life, aesthetic values are bred of our everyday practical concerns and interests. This is not to say that they just reflect individual preferences. Initially, an individual or a group of individuals must have liked a design, an arrangement of colors, or a sequence of sounds, a message or a theme, and must have had an interest in producing similar objects. It is, however, the agreement (spoken or unspoken) among a group of people that certain objects are to be preferred on account of specific features which they embody; that marks the first step towards the establishment of publicly accessible criteria of value which can serve as reasons for the ascription of aesthetic concepts (Novitz,1990).

Then we can conclude that:

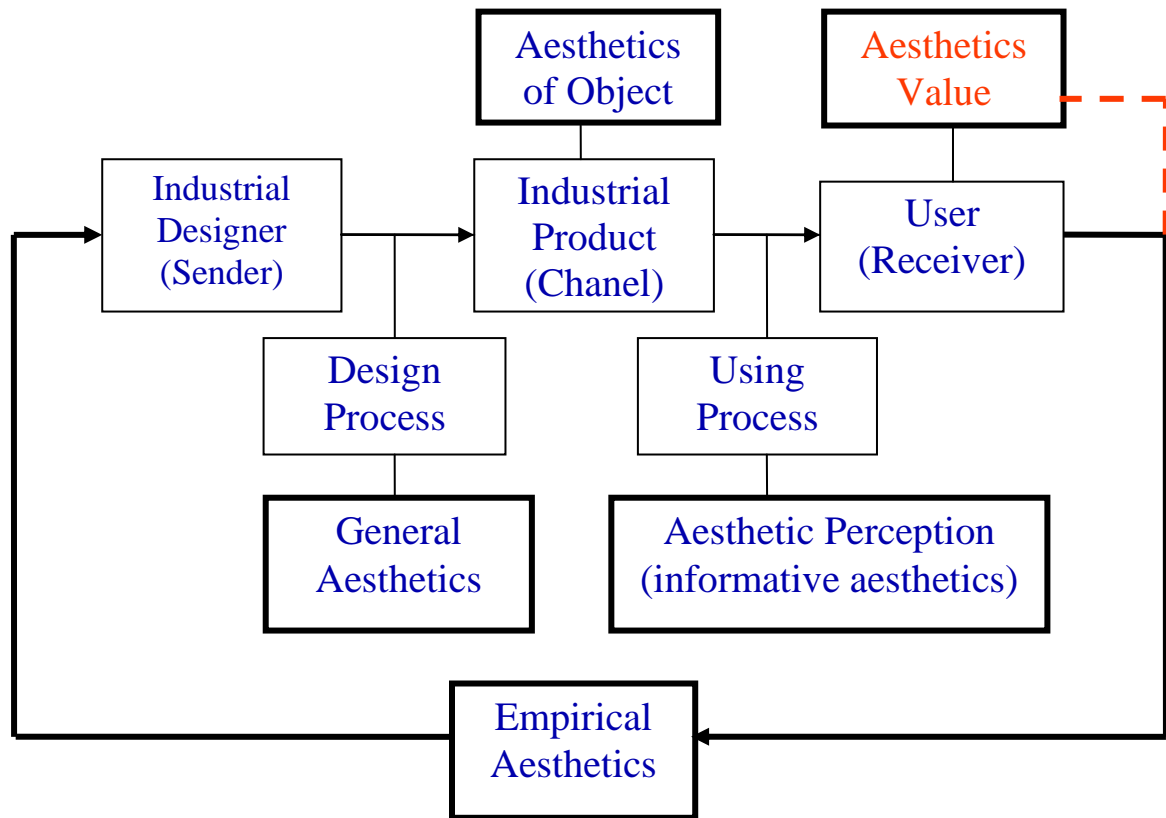
Aesthetic values appear themselves in the form of attributes and adjectives.

Aesthetic value is a kind of social value.

Like other social values, it is variable, related to the group, time and place (Hajati Modaraee, 2002).

So the next question is:

How the aesthetic values enter in the furniture design process?



In this graph, five different territories for aesthetics are defined in whole design process (Hajati Modaraee, 2002):

General aesthetics which embodies all knowledge which could be learn from aesthetics principles in collage courses.

Aesthetics of object is all aesthetical characteristics fulfilled in the object that consciously or unconsciously the designer gives to an object.

Aesthetic perception is talk about the valence of user/audience in perception the aesthetic of the object, those parts that can be understood by him or her (mostly through gestalt and elements of gestalt).

Aesthetic value is inside of the user and may or may not engage in design process. Designers should search them, define them, use them or criticize them in the sake of avant-garde or international aspects. So as a result, we see the connection line as a dash style.

Empirical Aesthetic is a feedback stage which embodies a lot of new data for designers in creating a new object/product for the users. And it may change to general aesthetics through a long time.

At this stage I should emphasize on why I chose furniture.

Why furniture!

Furniture is supposed to be a more decorative (Karkia, 1997) besides its functional aspects and also it is a symbol of social class, lifestyles and taste (Veblan, 2003).

Furniture designs are variable and vast.

Furniture industry is mostly local, competitive and conscious about the advantage of design.

Returning the revenue in Furniture industry is usually done in a short time as a matter of low cost process of manufacturing.

So by these facts, it seems that furniture is a good object for measuring aesthetic values in a group.

Before explaining about the procedure of defining these values maybe it is necessary to know the especial situation of using furniture and sitting appliances in Iran.

Furniture in Iran

There is a difference between Iranian traditional architecture and the other countries. Iranian traditional architecture emphasized on the separation between internal (Andaroni) and external (Bironi) living spaces. Andaroni was the private space and Bironi belongs to strangers and guests. In those days it is not usual to use furniture in the sheltered places (Pirnia, 1980:25); instead they used wooden beds as sitting appliance in the open places like gardens and yards and they used to use Poshti and Nahalin (Pirnia). Poshti is a kind of big cushion that is woven like carpet and is put at the wall on the ground to lean at it. Nahalin is consisted of three or four long pillows put together beside the wall with a narrow mattress in front of them on the ground. These appliances were used in guest house in clean and nit way as the sign of hospitality.

Although using furniture and seating appliance has an old history in Iran, it is supposed to be a modern phenomena in the society. Now with the process of globalization Iranian architecture became more and more similar to the western architecture. Nowadays instead of sitting on the ground, furniture and chair are entered to the houses, although the habit of sitting on the ground and use of traditional Poshti Farsh is not totally put aside. Especially using and having the Persian handmade carpets is still popular.

After the Islamic revolution (in 1978 that in some how slowed the process of modernization in Iran) there would be a strong trend to use no furniture in homes and sitting on the carpet (on the ground) had values and became a symbol of religious trends.

In contrast, in two recent decades after the war between Iran & Iraq using furniture beside other home appliances become popular and necessary in almost all level of society (Fazeli,).

So we encounter many new furniture shop centers that sell fashionable, stylish and symbolic design of furniture especially in big cities, like Tehran, Mashhad and Esfahan.

And nowadays new brides should have a set of luxury furniture in their Jahizieh (appliances that bride's father give to her).

Methodology

This research is a qualitative one and the techniques for data gathering and field work include interviews, participative observation and photography. Ten families are chosen from Tehranian young educated middle class lifestyle as the sample. These families were well educated, Iranian with cultural and artistic taste. They mostly invest their leisure time to studying, watching movies, going to art galleries and theaters. So we can assume their lifestyle as the cultural lifestyle.

Operationalization of the variables

some of the objective aesthetic values	
Rough	Smooth
Hard	Soft
Angled	Curved
Geometric	Organic
Symmetrical	Nonsymmetrical
Linear	Nonlinear
Straight	Slope
Light	Heavy
Short	Long
Small	Large
Shiny	Dull
Monochromic	Chromatic
Simple	Complex
Consenter	Scattered
Textural	Non textural
Chaotic	Ordered
Harmonic	Contrasted

Some of the subjective aesthetic value	
Tragic	Comic
Modern	Antic
Technological	Traditional
Style	Fashion
Similar	Different
Logic	Romantic
Simple	Complicated
Profane	Sacred
Material	Spiritual
functional	Formalistic
Non erotic	Erotic
industrial	Natural
idealistic	realistic
Obvious	Abstract
Western	Eastern
Peaceful	Exited
New	Repetitive

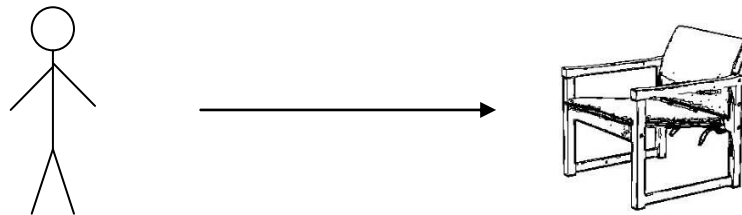
As mentioned above, it seems that aesthetic values are consisted of adjectives and attributes. In the table 1 and 2 some of the subjective and objective attributes are shown. These are polar attributes which usually we use to describe and assess some of our emotion or phenomena we encounter. When a user encounter a product (for example a furniture) naturally he assesst it and try to associate an adjective with it, as shown in picture1 (Chalabi,)

How to define these values?

Among all procedures which are suggested to assess values I chose Polaritätsprofil or Semantic differential (Rafipoor,) because it is more appropriate for visual assessment.

This method is based on association.

In this method a stimuli is given to questioners (users) to be judged and associated with polar attributes.



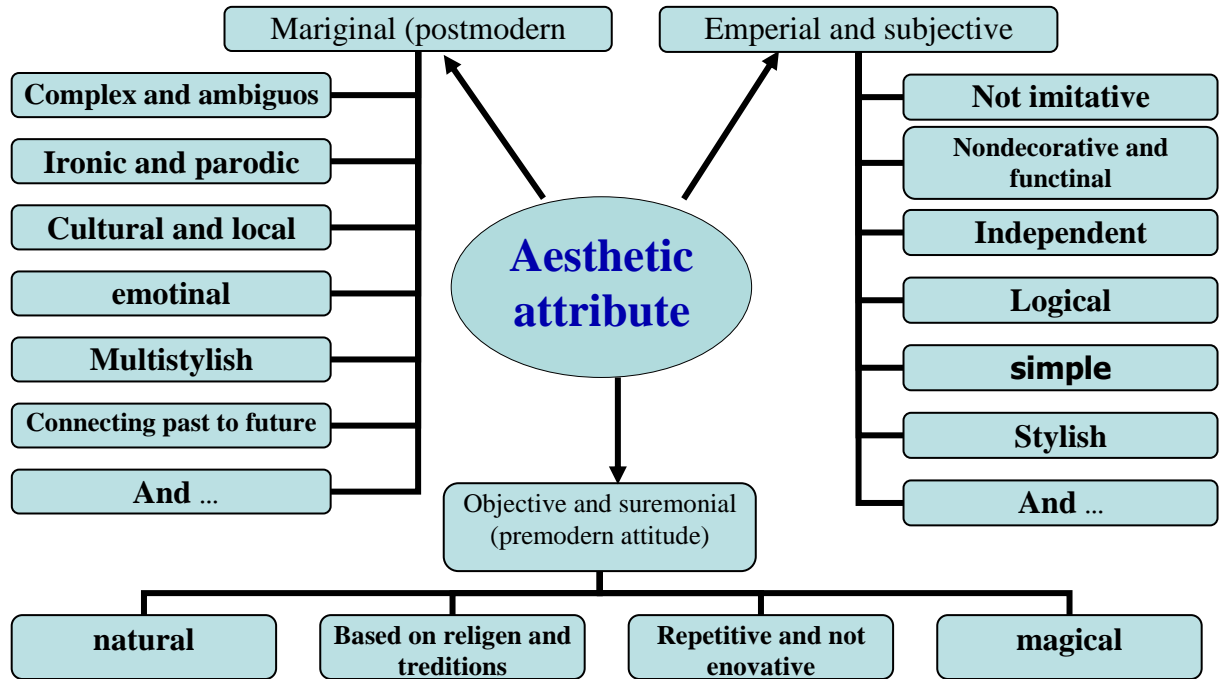
Picture 1: user is appealing by product

In other words, if we provide a list of polar attributes (like sharp and dull, serious and funny) we can make a questionnaire which leads us to assessment of aesthetic values.

Aesthetics values through history

By searching through history we could identify polar attributes in evaluation of aesthetics. As we know in pre modern era aesthetics was connected to the religion, myth, magic, tradition and non logical debates, in contrary aesthetics of modernism gives values to logical, independent and subjective issues (Zaimaran,).

There is a similar comparison between modern and post modern phenomena. In the fowling graph I try to illustrate these polar and contrast adjectives.

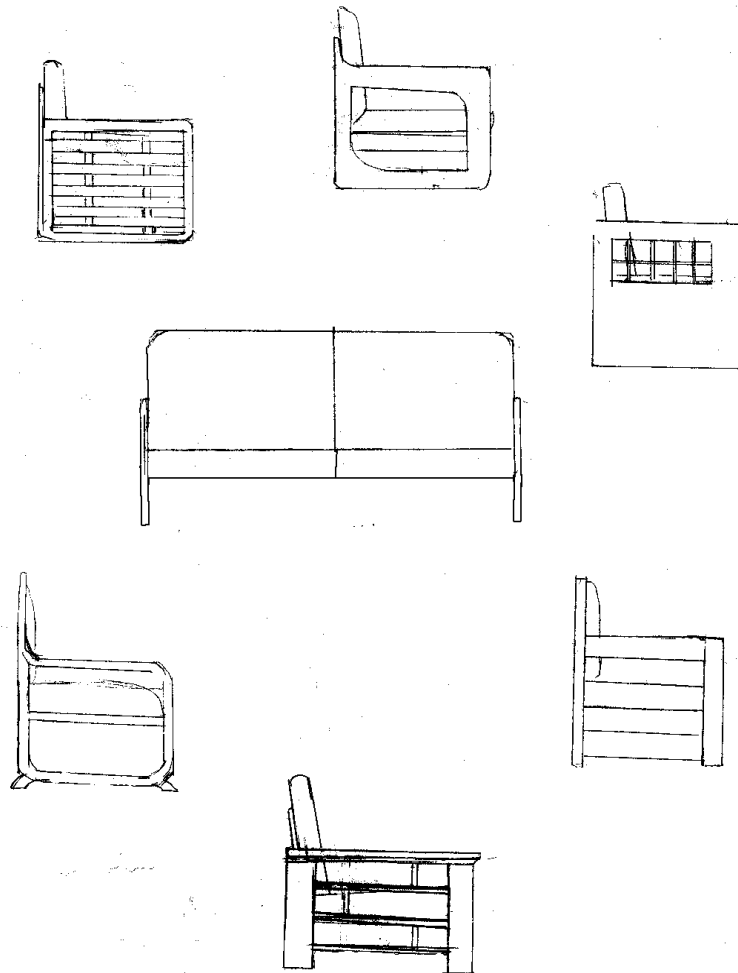


From some of the definition and description of artists and scholars we can make a table similar to the table 1 and 2 for modern and postmodern aesthetic values. These attributes are selected by some discription of artists like Charles Jenks and Robert Ventori, Locurbozie and others. (Jenks, 2003)(Ventori, 2003)

aesthetic values	
Modern	post modern
Emotional	Logical
Complicated	Simple
Nonsymmetrical	Symmetrical
Chromatic	Monochromic
Deconstructive	Constructive
Cultural	Functional
Chaotic	Ordered
Labyrinthine	Straight
Ambiguous	Clear
Mixed with tradition	Anti tradition

Ironic	Serious
Explicit	Independent
Polaristic	Unitarian
Decorative	Not decorative
Various	Monotonic

Data and findings



Picture 2: Gestalt analyses of the samples

According to these polar adjectives I tried to define the aesthetic values of the samples. Data and findings in this research are gathered from analyzing the interviews and gestalt of the furniture were used. Data show that these families have small apartments with a salon or a living room and one or two small bedrooms. They used the living room for collective activities in the family like drinking tea, eating fruits and snakes, watching TV, serving guests, afternoon conversation and so on. They mostly used a set of small furniture which accommodated 6 to 8 persons. Although most of these apartments had parakeet or ceramic floors, they used traditional carpets and had strong preferences to their national artistic crafts. They use functional furniture but they decorated their furniture with Gelim or traditional cushions that we can also trace in photos. As these families had the facilities of using new communication media like internet and satellite and moreover they had some experiences in foreign travels we can assume that they were familiar with new universal trends, so they had more possibilities to compare, evaluate

and chose. The furniture of the studied families was mostly from the sport models made of wood.

According to interviews they also showed an interest towards simple, functional, not decorated and wooden ones. In other words, they defined their desirable furniture with the main characteristic of simplicity against luxury.

The other characteristics were

- Comfortable against uncomfortable formal styles (like royal furniture).
- Simple cleaning against the difficult in cleaning (this factor is more affected by the out door employment of they ladies instead of aesthetic factors).
- Intimacy against nutria
- Tendency to styles and more stable trend of aesthetics against fashionable ones.

Furniture based on fashion are in market are fur forge and steel and metallic furniture, rattan chairs.

By analyzing the interviews we could find that the questioners had problem in finding the desirable furniture in the market.

In analyzing photos with the aid of gestalt analysis (gestalt elements and contractures, picture 2), we can also observe that the furniture they had currently used had the modern characteristics.

By comparing the results with the historical aspects of aesthetic values, we can associate the aesthetic values of the studied group with the modern values, especially the functionalism.

But by referring to photos we can conclude that these users unconsciously criticise the modernism by insisting on maintaining some of the traditional forms like using carpet, traditionally decorated cushions and coffee table clothes, and objects.

Picture 3: Some of the modern style furniture



Picture 4: Some of the post-modern style furniture



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