

## **Design as a Mediator Between Meaning and Understanding**

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*“Design is the intermediary between information and understanding.”*

Richard Grefé

Design may be understood not only as a professional activity or visual practice, but also as a way of making sense of the world. In philosophy, such a perspective is closely connected with hermeneutics – the theory of interpretation. Initially, hermeneutics was primarily concerned with the interpretation of texts, especially religious and philosophical writings [1]. Over time, however, philosophers recognised that interpretation extends far beyond textual analysis. Human beings interpret objects, images, spaces, interfaces, and environments. From this standpoint, design can be regarded as a hermeneutic practice [2].

Hermeneutics is a philosophical discipline that investigates how understanding emerges. It addresses questions such as: How is meaning constituted? How do we understand texts, images, and objects? In what ways does culture shape interpretation? Thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur demonstrated that understanding is never entirely neutral or purely objective [3; 4]. Interpretation is always situated within historical context, cultural background, prior knowledge, and lived experience.

Design operates within the space where meaning becomes intelligible. Designers create forms that allow people to orient themselves in reality: a poster gives visual structure to an idea, a building articulates cultural values, a product embodies technological possibilities, and an interface transforms data into experience. In this sense, design brings together the world, the object, the interpreter, and the interpretative act into a unified field of meaning.

Every act of understanding is shaped by cultural horizon, historical moment, individual experience, and imagination. When encountering an object, we do not

perceive it as a purely neutral form. Perception is always already interpretative. Designers intentionally work with this process, influencing how objects and environments will be understood and experienced.

Discussions of design often emphasise visual attractiveness or aesthetic value. However, design cannot be reduced to aesthetics alone. It is fundamentally connected with processes of meaning formation. Form becomes a carrier of significance. Through material, proportion, colour, scale, and interaction, meaning takes perceptible shape. In this perspective, design operates as a semiotic system – a structured field of signs through which meanings are communicated, negotiated, and transformed. Such symbolic structures contribute to the formation of identity, enable communication in multicultural contexts, and provide ways of expressing both individual and collective values.

Historically, artists acted as mediators who translated spiritual, philosophical, and religious ideas into sensory forms capable of generating meaningful experience. With the emergence of design as a professional field, designers have assumed a comparable role. They interpret technological developments and cultural transformations, integrating them into everyday life. Through the creation of tangible forms, designers participate in shaping human expectations, habits, and needs. The work of Dieter Rams, for example, particularly his principle “Less, but better” and the ten principles of good design, has influenced not only the appearance of electronic devices but also broader attitudes toward material culture [5].

In design, the object itself becomes a form of understanding. A designed artefact is never neutral; it discloses a particular perspective on the world. Within hermeneutic philosophy, a “thing” is not merely a physical entity but a site where meaning becomes accessible. A wooden chair, for instance, is significant not only because of its practical function.

It may evoke associations with comfort, intimacy, domesticity, spatial orientation, and embodied experience. Gothic chairs and armchairs, despite their expressive ornamentation, often appear uncomfortable, implicitly reminding us that the human condition is both spiritual and corporeal. A modern steel chair, by contrast,

may communicate ideas of minimalism, industrial culture, and contemporary aesthetic sensibility. Objects thus mediate relationships between human beings and reality, shaping the ways in which the world is disclosed.

One of the clearest examples of hermeneutic design is the logo. A logo represents a highly condensed visual structure capable of communicating identity, values, and conceptual orientation within minimal formal means. Interpretation in this case occurs almost immediately, often on a pre-reflective level. Cultural memory, visual experience, and symbolic associations operate simultaneously, allowing meaning to emerge without explicit verbal explanation.

For example, the Nike swoosh suggests movement and dynamism. The FedEx logo contains a hidden arrow that conveys direction and precision in logistics. The Apple logo evokes associations with simplicity and innovation.

Such visual forms do not explicitly define their meanings; rather, they create a field of possible interpretations [6]. This openness is a fundamental characteristic of hermeneutic design.

Hermeneutic philosophy emphasises that meaning is never fixed or universal. It emerges within cultural, historical, and experiential contexts that shape interpretation. A colour, form, or symbol may carry entirely different associations in different traditions. For instance, white often symbolises purity in Western cultures, whereas in several Asian traditions it is associated with mourning. Designers must take such interpretative frameworks into account, since communication through design depends on shared symbolic competence.

An important concept in hermeneutics is the hermeneutic circle. We understand the whole through its parts, but we also understand the parts through the whole. When viewing a poster, we perceive individual elements – typography, colour, composition – yet their significance becomes clear only within the overall structure. Designers constantly move within this circular process. They develop details while simultaneously considering the coherence of the entire system, including its socio-cultural and historical embeddedness [7].

Design establishes a dialogical relationship between object and user. Hermeneutic philosophers often describe interpretation as dialogue – an encounter between different perspectives (I–Thou, Self–Other) [7].

Design functions in a similar way. The designer embodies ideas in material form, while the object offers possibilities of meaning. The user interprets the object, appropriates it, and integrates it into everyday life. Design therefore does not operate as a monologue but as an ongoing dialogue between intention and perception, concept and experience, culture and daily practice.

Human culture is fundamentally symbolic. Language, images, rituals, and artefacts all function as symbolic structures. Design constantly engages with such structures, organising relations between signs and meanings [8]. Colour may signal danger or safety, the sacred or the ordinary. Form may express stability, balance, or movement. Designers must understand how symbolic systems function within particular cultural contexts, since designing always involves structuring fields of meaning rather than merely arranging visual elements.

All of the above suggests that design mediates between information and understanding by structuring the conditions under which meaning becomes accessible. Objects interpret technologies, images give form to ideas, interfaces transform data into experience, and spaces articulate cultural values.

Interpretation operates at every stage of the design process: research interprets human needs, conceptualisation interprets problems, prototyping interprets possible solutions, and evaluation interprets user response. Design thinking itself may therefore be understood as a hermeneutic activity. Ultimately, design contributes to human orientation in an increasingly complex world. When design functions successfully, it not only improves comfort and usability but also enriches everyday experience with meaning, coherence, and intelligibility.

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