

Power, Bias, and Legitimacy in Design Pedagogy: Who Gets to Define ‘Good Design’?

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Abstract

Design pedagogy is frequently positioned as a neutral and skill-oriented domain, focused on creativity and problem-solving. However, this study argues that it functions as a deeply political, cultural, and technological system that governs aesthetic legitimacy. Introducing an original theoretical contribution - **The Theory of Aesthetic Governance in Design Education** - this paper examines how power operates through institutional structures, cultural conditioning, and algorithmic systems to define what counts as “good design.”

This paper further develops the **Power Triangle of Design Pedagogy**, a conceptual model illustrating the interdependence of institutional authority, cultural capital, and algorithmic mediation. Through a theoretically grounded and analytically rich discussion drawing on Foucault, Bourdieu, and Escobar, it critically examines Western dominance, critiques systems and institutional hierarchies, and explores the emerging role of artificial intelligence in shaping design standards.

Using India as a critical analytical site, this study explores the tensions between global design frameworks and local epistemologies, such as *jugaad* and craft traditions. It introduces key concepts such as **Algorithmic Pedagogy** and **Cultural Compression**, demonstrating how contemporary systems do not merely exclude but reshape and dilute diverse design expressions.

The paper concludes by proposing a pluriversal and posthuman model of design education, along with policy-level recommendations for decentralizing authority and democratizing design legitimacy.

1. Introduction: Design Education as Aesthetic Governance

Design education has long been framed as a domain that nurtures creativity, innovation, and problem-solving. However, this framing often obscures the underlying structures through which design knowledge is produced, evaluated and legitimized. Rather than being a neutral field, design pedagogy operates as a system that actively shapes perceptions of value, taste and quality.

This paper introduces the concept of **Aesthetic Governance**, which refers to the processes through which design education regulates what is considered aesthetically valid, culturally appropriate, and professionally acceptable. Unlike traditional governance systems that rely on explicit rules and policies, aesthetic governance operates subtly through critique systems, curriculum structures, institutional hierarchies, and, increasingly, digital and algorithmic infrastructures.

The question of “who defines good design” is therefore not simply philosophical but deeply political. It involves examining the power structures that determine which voices are heard, which aesthetics are valued, and which forms of knowledge are legitimized.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Theory of Aesthetic Governance

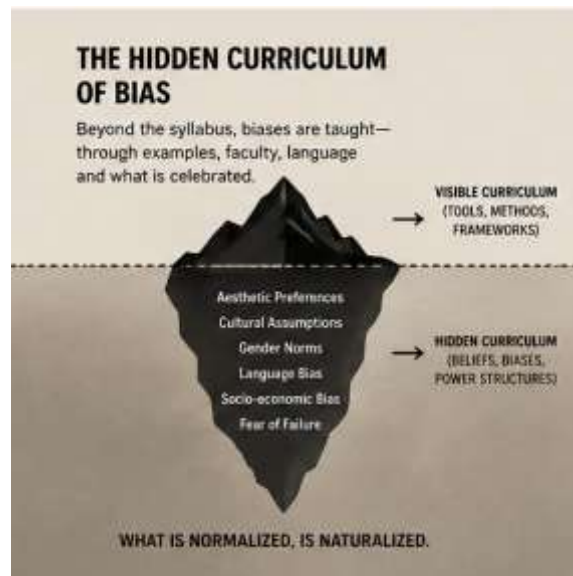
2.1 Aesthetic Governance (Original Contribution)

The **Theory of Aesthetic Governance** proposed in this study argues that design pedagogy functions as a system that regulates aesthetic legitimacy through the interconnected mechanisms of validation, reproduction, and amplification.

This theory expands the scope of epistemic injustice by focusing on how visual and material expressions are hierarchically organized. This suggests that aesthetic standards are not natural or universal but are produced through structured interactions between institutions, cultural norms, and technological systems.

Three core propositions define this theory.

1. **Aesthetic standards are socially constructed** - what is considered “good design” emerges from historical and cultural contexts rather than objective criteria.
2. **Legitimacy is systemically produced**; design value is not inherent but conferred through institutional validation and social recognition.
3. **Power operates through normalization**: instead of direct enforcement, design pedagogy shapes behavior by establishing norms that are internalized by learners.



Implicit biases embedded in pedagogy influence learning beyond the formal curriculum.

Source: Image generated using AI.

2.2 Foucault: Power, Discipline, and Normalization

Michel Foucault’s concept of power as diffuse and embedded within knowledge systems provides a critical lens for understanding design pedagogy. In this context, power does not operate through coercion but through normalization.

Design critique systems function as disciplinary mechanisms in which students are continuously evaluated and guided toward accepted standards. Over time, this process leads to self-regulation, where students internalize dominant aesthetic norms and align their work with them.

Thus, power in design education is not imposed externally but is reproduced internally through practice.

2.3 Bourdieu: Cultural Capital and Taste Formation

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital explains how taste is socially conditioned and unequally distributed. In design education, students acquire cultural capital through exposure to specific visual languages, references and discourses.

For instance, minimalist designs may be framed as sophisticated, whereas ornamental or culturally specific designs may be perceived as excessive or unrefined. These judgments are not neutral but reflect the dominant cultural hierarchies.

Students with prior exposure to these dominant frameworks are better positioned to succeed, reinforcing systemic inequalities.

2.4 Escobar: Pluriversality and Design Futures

Arturo Escobar's concept of the pluriverse challenges the idea of a single, universal design logic. Instead, it advocates multiple coexisting design epistemologies rooted in specific cultural and ecological contexts.

Applying this to design pedagogy requires a shift away from standardized evaluation frameworks toward more context-sensitive and inclusive approaches.

3. The Power Triangle of Design Pedagogy

3.1 Framework Overview

The **Power Triangle of Design Pedagogy** conceptualizes design legitimacy as emerging from the interaction of three forces:

- **Institutional Authority:** Educational institutions, accreditation systems, and industry bodies define and validate design standards.
- **Cultural Capital:** Socially conditioned tastes, aesthetic preferences, and discursive practices that shape perceptions and evaluations.
- **Algorithmic Mediation:** Digital platforms, AI tools, and content systems that amplify and normalize specific design trends.

3.2 System Dynamics

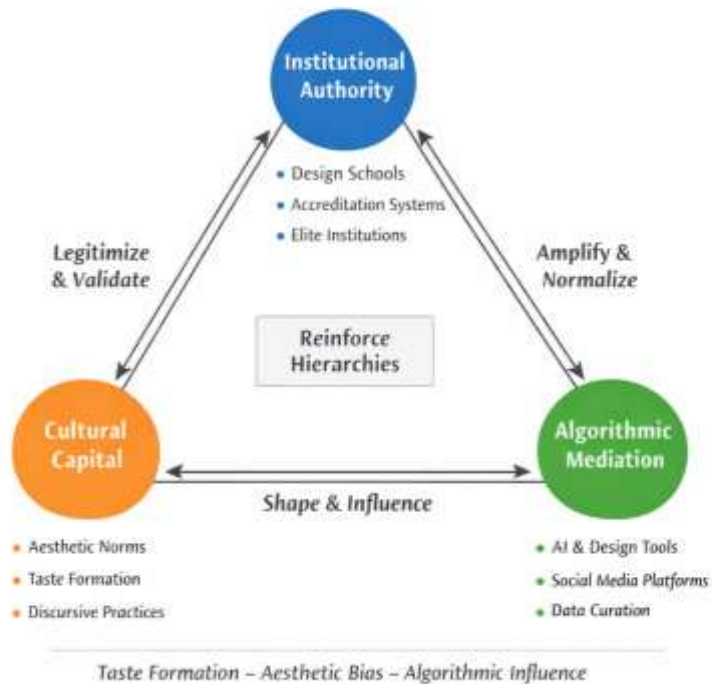
These three forces operate in a continuous feedback loop.

- Institutions establish what counts as legitimate design
- Cultural capital internalizes these standards as taste
- Algorithms amplify these standards through visibility and replication

This loop creates a self-reinforcing system that stabilizes the dominant definitions of good design while marginalizing alternative perspectives.

The Power Triangle of Design Pedagogy

Interplay of Authority, Culture, and Algorithms



4. Western Dominance and Epistemic Flattening

The global design education system continues to be heavily influenced by Western modernist tradition. While historically significant, the universalization of these frameworks has led to what this study terms **epistemic flattening**.

Epistemic flattening refers to the reduction of diverse design traditions into a singular evaluative framework. This process marginalizes local knowledge systems and limits the scope of design innovation by prioritizing standardized over contextual relevance.



Eurocentric aesthetics are normalized as universal, while local design forms are marginalized.

Source: Image generated using AI.

5. Critique Systems as Mechanisms of Control

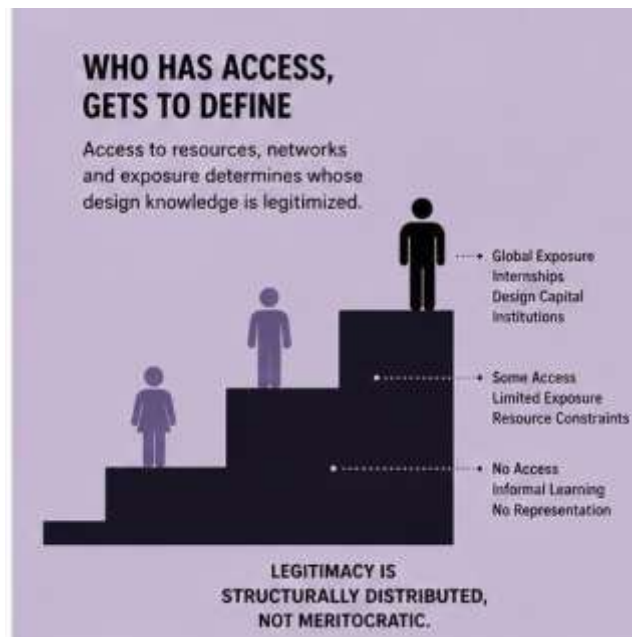
Critique systems are central to design education and function as mechanisms of control. They shape not only what students create, but also how they think and present their ideas.

Students are often rewarded for aligning themselves with dominant narratives and penalized for deviation. Over time, this leads to self-censorship and conformity, thereby limiting creative exploration.

6. Institutional Power and Legitimacy Hierarchies

Elite institutions play a critical role in defining the legitimacy of design. Their influence extends beyond education to industry and global recognition systems.

This creates a hierarchy in which institutional validation is prioritized over contextual effectiveness, marginalizing grassroots and informal design practices.



Access to institutions and networks shapes who gets to define and validate design standards.

Source: Image generated using AI.

7. India as a Critical Analytical Case

India provides a complex context in which multiple design epistemologies coexist and interact.

7.1 Structural Tension

Indian design education reflects the tension between global frameworks and local knowledge systems. Institutions often attempt to integrate both; however, evaluation criteria tend to favour global standards.

7.2 Jugaad as Alternative Epistemology

Jugaad represents a form of adaptive and resourceful problem-solving that challenges formal design methodologies. This highlights the importance of context and constraints in shaping design solutions.

7.3 Craft as Marginalized Knowledge

Craft traditions embody deep material and cultural knowledge but are often excluded from the formal design discourse. This reflects broader hierarchies that privilege industrial and institutional designs over traditional practices.

8. Cultural Compression

Contemporary design systems often do not erase cultural diversity but compress it into simplified and decontextualized forms. This process allows superficial inclusion while maintaining underlying power structures.

9. Algorithmic Pedagogy

9.1 AI as Design Authority

AI tools are increasingly influencing the way design is learned and practised. They provide instant solutions and suggestions, shaping the perception of what constitutes a good design.

9.2 Dataset Bias

These systems are trained on existing data, which often reflects dominant aesthetics. As a result, they reinforce existing biases and standardize the design practices.

9.3 Platform Feedback Loops

Algorithms prioritize content that performs well, leading to cycles of repetition and convergence in the content. Designers adapt to these trends, reinforcing them further.

10. Counter-Argument: Democratization of Design

Some scholars argue that digital tools democratize design by increasing access to design. However, this study argues that access does not equate to equality. Power is not eliminated but is redistributed, often in less visible ways.

11. Implications for Policy and Future Design Institutions

To address these challenges, design education must undergo a structural transformation.

Curricula must be expanded to include diverse epistemological and contextual approaches. Critique systems should be redesigned to encourage dialogue rather than enforce conformity. Institutions must recognize and integrate grassroots design practices into their operations. Finally, students must be equipped with the skills to critically engage with such algorithmic systems.

12. Conclusion

Design pedagogy is a system of aesthetic governance shaped by institutional, cultural and technological forces. Recognizing this allows for a more critical and inclusive approach to design education in general.

The future of design pedagogy lies in embracing plurality, decentralizing authority, and critically engaging with the emerging technologies.

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