



## Artefacts and affordance: the surface of meaning

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Questions: Can an artefact do more than simply illustrate a concept? Can an artefact avoid its objectness? Can the reception of a designed object avoid the openness of affordance typical of “natural” objects? Can a designer structure meaning as an object?

Context: Somewhere between Gibson's ecology of perception (affordance – “the actionable properties between the world and an actor”: Norman) and Norman's “perceived affordance” (“in design, we care much more about what the user perceives than what is actually true”: Norman) there is view of objects/artefacts that includes artefacts as “being for” structured intellectual engagement of a determinable kind. We know what opera is for. We know what research outcomes are for. We can come to know what research artefacts are for. The terms needed can be liberated from a critique of the existing approaches to affordance including those prior to Gibson's seminal work.

Significance: The issue of artefacts as “bearers of knowledge” is central to the agony of design research within the university. Strong arguments have been made for the general failure of artefacts to satisfy the criteria of research outcomes.

Inquiry/process: Through a philosophical investigation and extension of Gibson's perceptual ecology it is possible to relocate the objects of design within a discourse of meaning that embraces both the “true” affordances and the received/perceived affordances.

Outcomes: It is anticipated that introducing an expanded concept of affordance into this debate will offer significant strength and rigour to the arguments of proponents of artefacts as research objects. The conceptual structures will provide a ground for the debate to go beyond its current circularity if not polarity.