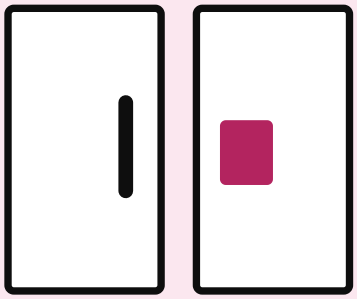
Concept

Affordance

What an object or interface lets someone do, like grab, push or tap. In design, what matters most is that this possibility is perceived.



Origin

Gibson (1966, 1979); in design, Norman (1988)

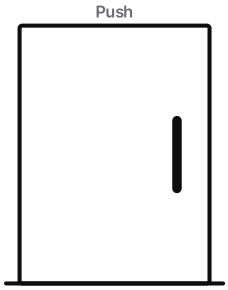
What problem it addresses

It explains why we push doors that open by pulling, and why some buttons go untouched because they don't look like buttons.

An example

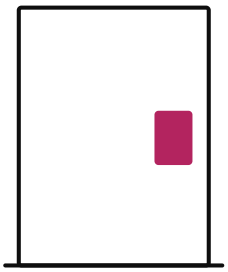
Two identical doors that open by pushing.

With a handle



A vertical handle invites you to grab and pull. **People pull and fail.**

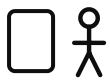
With a plate



A flat plate only lets you push. **It opens on the first try.**

The door works the same in both cases; what changes is what it seems to allow. Norman calls these cues signifiers (Norman, 2013).

Why it happens

1 

We see objects in terms of what we can do with them;

2 

shape, size and position suggest an action;

3 

if the cue misleads, we act wrongly even though the object works.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Make what can be touched look touchable: shape, contrast and position.

Avoid

Making something look like a button when it does nothing.

Don't fall for it

If someone needs a "push" sign, the design isn't communicating.

4 cases

What the research says

Gaver told them apart by whether the action exists and whether it is perceived: perceptible, hidden, false and absent (Gaver, 1991).

●●● **Solid evidence.** Gibson used the word for everything the environment offers; Norman narrowed it for design and later proposed speaking of signifiers for the visible signals.

Connections

Used in

- Interaction design
- UI design
- Industrial design

Related to

- Microinteractions
- Mental model
- Product semantics
- Signifier and signified

Authors and works

1966, 1979	**James J. Gibson**	Coined the term and later developed it: what the environment offers an animal, given its capabilities.
1991	**William Gaver**	Classified technology affordances by whether or not they are perceived.
1999	**Donald A. Norman**	Distinguished real affordance from perceived affordance, which is the one design controls.
2013	**Donald A. Norman**	Proposed calling signifiers the signals that show where and how to act.

Sources

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- Gibson, J. J. (1979). The ecological approach to visual perception. Houghton Mifflin.
- Gaver, W. W. (1991). Technology affordances. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '91) (pp. 79–84). ACM. View source (https://doi.org/10.1145/108844.108856)
- Norman, D. A. (1999). Affordance, conventions, and design. Interactions, 6(3), 38–43. View source (https://doi.org/10.1145/301153.301168)
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