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On why even Danish Design does need Theory

Theoretical First Aid Kit for Handymen in Research

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Abstract

Living in a Paradise of Danish Design where things express all the correct ideals, it would appear that you don't need elaborate design theory. But why wasn't there even in the founding years of this strong tradition any need for further theoretical legitimation than an evident norm of good taste?

Today a theoretical development is needed worldwide, and Danish Design is a characteristic example of a common problem. The historical survey gives a background for considering the problems of the wanted dialogue between theory and practice, where very different professional and scientific interests are mixed up.

This paper tries to pin down how elements of the Danish tradition might be transformed into a cross-disciplinary design profession – developed and strengthened by interdisciplinary dialogues in doctoral education.

Danish Design History

Danish design as phenomenon grew in the years after World War II to a state of international awareness and became a commercial success measured by the standards of the past. Danish designers created in the 1950s and early 1960s pieces of furniture where especially the chairs became well-known in the fast expanding market of the western world.

These products were to the outside-viewer perceived as if they were enrolled in a common paradigm and supplied with a kind of value like Branding. This obvious affinity was not originated by means of a calculated business strategy, and it was not the result of an ideological struggle followed by articulation, manifestos or theory.

Danish designers were all educated from the only school of design: The Department of Furniture, the so called “Klint School” at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen established in 1924 by Kaare Klint, who was the methodological head in front of a narrow group of teachers. The school was a modernistic inspired project in opposition to stylish decoration in an old-fashioned production, but the school was not radical by any means. The teachers were pragmatic handymen. They wrote articles against the ‘bad taste’ of their enemies, and they did create some theory to legitimate themselves. They are, however, known for their work - not their writings.

Two or three generations of designers came from this school. The ideological message can still be sensed as unarticulated values in known Danish products like B&O, Lego, and Bodum and is still dominating the self-image of Danish designers. The theories and methodologies originally developed among the designers have lost any relevance to the present.

When foreign art historians conclude a common ideological base for Danish design in the 1950s, they often point out recognition of a social obligation to enrich the culture more than commercial interests. Charlotte & Peter Field (2002) regard Danish design as based on “a democratic attitude to design, expressed through social ideals ... with a moral and humanistic ethos ...with roots in Lutheranism”. The Danish design teacher Arne Karlsen (2002) confirmed this social obligation with nearly biblical expressions like “a durable belief in equal worthiness - man is not always nearest to himself” Arne Karlsen seems to form an alliance between Luther and Marx, very similar to the culturally leading Social Democratic parties in the Scandinavian countries.

The Danish historian Søren Mørch (1982) emphasizes the materialistic background in his characterization of Danish design developed from local craftsmanship into an organised production pointing at an international consumer market. He mentions how the rather poor raw materials have been optimized in a wealthy, agricultural tradition “*with an overwhelming attention to home, family and everyday life*”, and established an understanding of designed objects as enrichments of common life far from luxury. This is supported by the fact that Denmark has never been blessed with particularly rich or dominating upper classes.

The Scandinavian countries developed crucially differently to Germany and Bauhaus in the 1930s. The Social Democratic parties joined the growing working class and the national rural interests into a cultural and political transformation of the countries, with an obligation to teach people how solidarity to the nation can lead to wealth and richness expressed in values of economic growth,

social security and education. This Social Democratic politic challenged the industrial forces by supporting a small-scale production. The designers became educators, pointing at values like usefulness and seriousness, and expressed that good taste is synonymous with modesty. So in fact Danish design turned into an easy downstream travel with wide acceptance in the leading cultural layers. The need for exchange between theory and practice became insignificant.

Classicistic Pragmatism

The Klint School was parallel to Bauhaus and to “Die neue Sachlichkeit”, but they developed their own design-method, which actually stayed alive for the next 40 years. The method is based on anthropometrics. Empiric registration and processing of any proportion in the human context. It turned into what can be seen as an obsession for measuring. The anatomy, the ergonomic space, the objects among us and the space we extend. This scientific approach became related to ideas of neo-classicism expressed in formalistic studies of proportion systems.

Kaare Klint expressed the opinion that designers through measuring collected a scientific knowledge of traditional design. “Furniture does not need to express interesting tastefulness or be outstanding objects, but rather types”. (Fisker, 1963) This radicalism was softened by several paradoxes. The “honesty” of the materials was judged by their reliability to craftsman tools and not in relationship to an industrial process. The industrial product was conceived with a carpenter’s mind and expressed the enjoyment of the material. The School had the understanding that pure industrial aesthetics was a threat to humanism, and the obligation to the Klint School was to balance industrial demands to human needs. This attitude to production, nature and consumer indicates a political base. A social and democratic belief in everyone’s right to beautiful objects as an integrated part in quality of life.

The repository furniture system by Børge Mogensen made for FDB, the Cooperative Society, 1947-50, represents a large amount of data being processed into a very simple proportional system of 2:3:4. The principles in this example are similar to the office systems by the Eameses, 1950. But there are very distinct differences in the appearance. Mogensen had to reach a cleaned ‘timeless ideal’ though the material and the way it was processed. The Eames System represents an open template where different materials and new functions could find a position. The Eameses demonstrate an enthusiasm for new material and techniques in a way Mogensen would regard as superficial and temporary.

The professional paradigm of the 1950s.

The Danish design profession worked in the post-war years within a single paradigm constituted by common delimitations, theories, methods, values and references. Of course, the profession had their debate and quarrel within the paradigm unity, but the normative foundation of theories and ideas was accepted to such a degree that practice approached theory through development of open methods and tools. There was in the education no strict distinction between student and teacher, practice and education. Much like the Magician and his Apprentice. Outside the profession the paradigm was clearly recognized as well, and has been described insensitively in design theory and later in design history.

The paradigm dissolves in the early 1970s. The “Klint School” was unable to meet the challenges of

the mass-consumer. IKEA was judged as if values were eroded to quantities, although the business concept of IKEA is rather close to user-centred everyday life expressed in the original Danish design ideas. One man could not meet the expanding complexity of design problems with a wooden object processed with craftsmanship. To meet the new user it was no longer appropriate just to measure his goods. It involved theories and methods from professions, which were able to deal with the dynamic forces of society. In USA this development was discussed by e.g. Christopher Alexander in “Pattern Language” and Robert Venturi in “*Learning from Las Vegas*” Danish Design was not able to bridge the growing gap between theory and practice.

Several schools have tried to establish a new appropriate relationship between theory and practice.

- One way has been the art schools’ negligence of both theory and production through the individualistic artwork where intuition and experience take over
- Another can be seen in products like B&O and Stelton, where the cleaned classicism survives as a formal conservatism in a commercial style expression with no theory
- A third way has been the development of industrial design schools using a thorough technical research based on methods from science and product engineering, and theories from marketing and business schools
- A fourth could be mentioned: Danish data scientists have developed a new design profession with human centered usability methods from social science, and with a clear reference to ideas and visions of a welfare society. In international data science networks it is called “*The Scandinavian Way*”.

Route Map of Scientific Interests

The situation in Denmark as analysed here concerning design theory would of course be recognisable anywhere else. We only see it as a very distinct and symptomatic example. The international, theoretical literature on design laments the lack of a clear status for theory in relation to design practice. The problems seem to be global, though we need local examples in order to try out solutions. The fact that Danish designers can communicate worldwide in the forms of Bang & Olufsen or Royal Copenhagen does not mean that they can communicate with and understand the different institutions in Denmark, where researchers investigate different aspects of design and form the basis of design theories. If design is solving problems we still need the right analysis of these problems in the world of designers themselves – for developing theoretical understandings of design and making the basis of institutions for education and science. The doctoral education lies at the core of this and shows the strongest symptoms.

As important actors in the society of knowledge and information, designers have of course been dealing with huge amounts of very different knowledge. They should be fit for the demands of the future, as when the government wants the design institutions to build on scientific research. Nonetheless it seems to be quite a culture gap when the schools of design and architecture are asked to develop theoretical and scientific understandings of design in projects and in education. Though standing in a landscape of information theory, sociology, computer science, aesthetics, cultural theory and other sciences they have not learned to develop and argue for their own scientific approach. Knowledge is not only diverse, but is used in very different ways, and there is a culture of science to be learned. To approach the dilemma and help the dialogue that can develop the theoretical reflections, we have to understand the very different roles of knowledge, of design

theory. We need a sociology of knowledge, not within the broad field of inspirations, but within the specific constellation of interests between design practice, education and scientific research in design.

This paper of course does not offer such an in-depth analysis, but we can try to sketch out a route map of the different scientific interests in design, and point at some of the frequent problems and misunderstandings that stop this dialogue of theory and practice that everyone dreams of, even before it gets started. This dialogue seems so close at hand – ‘it is happening’ out there – but it is hard to agree on a general, principal outcome beyond inspiration and fertile misunderstandings. To enable an outcome and ensure common understanding, we must acknowledge that design theory is not one thing and does not necessarily express one common interest, but is formed by different positions and interests. A rough sketching can mark three sorts of design theory:

1. Designers’ theories – arguing for a specific practice (explanations or even manifests)
2. Methodology – general principles in educating and developing design
3. Analytic, historical and philosophical studies – concluding general theories

Hans-Christian Jensen at Cultural Studies, University of Southern Denmark, has developed this scheme further. There are tough discussions on the scientific value of each of these, but that is not the point here. We could locate the three sorts institutionally in design practice, design schools or universities, but they ought to be interchangeable so that principal ideas are exchanged. The precondition for this, though, is to understand the different roles of theory in these contexts – legitimating production, legitimating institutions, legitimating independent research. Perhaps we could also differentiate the three as research for, through or on design, but that does not bring us any closer to an exchange. A research through design is a positive approach, but it has to confront the same common dilemma. To make common results of a dialogue between theory and practice, the participants have to know the differing logics of making theories and be prepared for the frequent, severe misunderstanding. The common understanding in such an exchange ought not to be any big problem, but often it seems to be.

Well, shouldn’t design be the most obvious field for an interdisciplinary dialogue? What about the long use of sociologists, anthropologists and many other experts in interdisciplinary team-works that almost seems to be part of the very idea of design as solution to problems in society? This progressive ideal is very important as an openness to impulses, but it has its specified interests in the design process. Use of consultants or even teamwork is not the same as a principal dialogue. Guy Julier (2000) writes in *The Culture of Design* that there is a transformation from multidisciplinary practice to interdisciplinary focus on process. There are many such suggestions of new ways of teamwork, but the shift from multi- to interdisciplinarity still has to show results of general, theoretical value. In the seminal book *Vision in Motion* Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1947) stressed the role of interdisciplinarity in both practice and education at the Chicago Institute of Design, but at the end he goes one step further and sketches a dream of a cultural institute where artists and scientists from all fields should meet and work, inspiring each other and approaching an understanding of the new vision, the view and understanding of a world in motion. This utopian forum belongs to the fundamental ideas behind modern design, and we should not forget the overall perspective as background for general reflection on design theory in itself.

But why insist on a common understanding that will be impossible? Misunderstandings will always sneak in and in the end they can be fruitful, inspirational. Well, that is fine when designers feel inspired by a lecture of a theorist. That's an important use of theory, but it should not be understood as a way of developing theory itself. The usual creative misunderstandings cannot form the basis when we are going to teach designers to work with theory as doctoral students. A doctoral education in design is not just an equal dialogue between theory and practice; now the designer must learn theory by itself. Philosophers, aestheticians, sociologists and all theoretical experts love to be invited to a dialogue with designers and try to mix theory with practice, but there is an asymmetry in this exchange. The theorist is interested in getting feedback from the designer as the practitioner who confirms or challenges theory. But the dialogue ought to start differently if the designer should benefit and learn theory by itself and then discuss practice on a more equal basis. Of course, the practitioner does not have to be converted into a theorist, but a theorist should deliver a theoretically common ground as a tool for the dialogue.

All this is only to say that the nice picture of theory and practice in dialogue covers more complex and unequal interests. It is a very important ideal, but in doctoral education the preconditions of the exchange have to be made clear. It cannot be based on fruitful misunderstandings. If the goal is a theoretical development to strengthen design, it is a different situation than the meeting of a theorist and a practitioner. We need this meeting but on other premises where the specific interests are clarified. Design scholars, for instance, need discussions with both natural, social and cultural sciences if design research should be able to legitimate itself as scientific work.

In Denmark we see a peculiar phenomenon. Theorists writing about design, present their theories as homemade, craftsmanlike. It is hard to say whether it is to address the very practice-based tradition with the picture of theorist and practitioner in mind – or admitting that the theories are made from scratch without reference to a scientific discipline of design theory. They build, of course, on bases from other disciplines, information theory, aesthetics, sociology, but they give the poor impression that everyone has to make design theory on his own. As a teacher with the responsibility of students learning theory instead of making it up, it is difficult to point out a standard list of common design theories to build on without taking very diverse leads to semiotics, computer science, anthropological, material studies or aesthetics. But these advanced theories are not suited for teaching the basic dealing with theories. At the Copenhagen School of Design an attempt is made to develop a basic course introducing general theories on science and philosophy, not only for Ph.D. students but for all ordinary students. That could be a new ground for learning, discussing and developing design theory.

A general productive dialogue needs some kind of common ground for developing theoretical tools for understanding. In this paper our point of departure in the history of Danish design suggests a neutral common ground that is the history of design theory. Historical considerations and investigations are testing ground for theoretical understandings. In teaching as well as in development of new theories it offers a background where new understandings can be reflected on very different understandings of design and society. The history of design theory can be a study of the complex, professional and institutional interests and contribute to the sociology of knowledge concerning design. The design historian could be a midwife in dialogues between theory and practice, but that role is of course no less complex and demanding than those of other participants.

This paper does not propose any specific theoretical tool or methods for the handyman in scientific research. It is the route map of diverse theoretical interests in design that is the first aid kit needed for navigating and advancing in this field. The scholar in design must be able to legitimate her or his own project by placing it in relation to other scientific positions and principal interests, and to develop the theories in dialogue with these. It looks like design theory will always have to navigate in an interdisciplinary field, as design practice is constantly expanding. But do not make a Flying Dutchman.

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