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Bang, Anne Louise

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The Designer as Facilitator – Actively Involvement of End-users in the Design Process

Anne Louise Bang*

Kolding School of Design, Aagade 10, DK-6000 Kolding, Denmark
E-mail: alb@dskd.dk

Abstract: This is a report from an on-going research project within design research. The project involves a collaborative partner from the textile industry working with fabrics for upholstery. The author – herself a textile designer, is affiliated with the design unit in the company and the project has a very strong relation to design practice.

Focusing on so-called emotional values the project investigates how stakeholders and end-users can actively contribute to the design process. Even though that the collaborating company has an in-house design unit responsible for certain emotional as well as functional aspects in the development process it is a highly technical and functional trade. It is therefore assumed that there is a 'sleeping' potential which can be released investigating emotional values.

Keywords: Design process; design game; textile design; emotional values; sensuous qualities; aesthetic appeal; exploratory approach; design research

Introduction

Traditionally the designer is responsible for aesthetic appeal and surface/product appearance even though that during recent years she is also involved in problem definition and service solutions. Her professional knowledge is based on education as well as reflection-in-practice [1]. As such part of her knowledge is more or less tacit or implicit knowing. In the collaborating company the designer is acknowledged as the expert designing and communicating aesthetic appeal and sensuous qualities to the other stakeholders in the development process. This research project has a focus on how she can also involve stakeholders and end-users in the design process.

The paper specifically reports from a pilot study introducing designers in the collaborating company to 'design games' as an approach for handling emotional values in the design process. Furthermore the study was an opportunity for the author as well as the company designers to achieve mutual experience with a 'hands-on' based and exploratory approach. Following the initial design game a subsequent and almost similar design game involving three employees – who were considered as end-users, from within the company were set up. The second game was conducted on the designers request to investigate if other people than professional designers could easily participate in a design game.

Textile industry – the collaborative partner in the project

Generally the textile industry faces several challenges caused by technological and global development [2].

Figure 1 From fabrics on rolls to fabrics in use.



The collaborative partner in the project is in a process extending the value chain to involve not just fabric on rolls but also related solutions and services such as design for upholstery and prefabricated sheets for office chairs. This extension is also a movement forward in the value chain towards the end-user. Coming from a customer-oriented (and before that market-oriented) business strategy the focus is now moving towards a user-oriented business strategy. Furthermore new products must be of exceptional functional or emotional value in order to compete on the global market. Working with the fabrics as solutions in a context (e.g. as part of an office chair in an office instead of fabric on rolls) the user perspective seems important as a source of information.

Research question

One challenge in this research project is that work life in the collaborative company is busy and fragmented. There are several simultaneously development projects and a number of deadlines set by customers which – in this case, are typically furniture manufacturers world wide. An active involvement of stakeholders and end-users must fit into this e.g. by considering if it is possible or even necessary to develop tools for 'everyday-innovation' in an industrial textile design process.

In textile science it is emphasised that e.g. hand qualities (a sensuous quality) is of crucial importance. At the same time the words describing hand qualities (e.g. soft and hard) are equivocal [3]. However the textile designer is broadly acknowledged as the expert when it comes to aesthetic appeal and sensuous qualities. Another challenge in the research project is therefore to concretise the textile design knowledge on aesthetic appeal and sensuous qualities in order to provide a basis for the involvement of stakeholders and end-users.

One research question in present project is therefore: how can the textile designer facilitate the active involvement of end-users and other stakeholders when it comes to emotional values, sensuous qualities and product experience?

Active involvement of stakeholders and end-users

Besides being part of the textile designer's expert knowledge aesthetic appeal and sensuous qualities are also individual and subjective experiences for everyone and it is therefore considered of value to actively involve other people in the design process in order to get access to their experiences.

Figure 2 Aesthetic appeal and sensuous qualities are an individual and subjective experience.



In order to get access to peoples experiences and perhaps unknown needs it is proposed to empathise with them. As stated by Sanders & Dandavate there is a difference between what people say and think, what people do and use and what people know, feel and dream about. On a sliding scale it is explicit, observable, tacit or latent knowledge. To get access to the explicit and observable knowledge we can talk to people and observe them. In order to get access to their tacit and latent knowledge we can invite them to make or create something. This can create empathy and thus enable people to express what they know, feel and dream about [4].

In the research field of participatory design there is a huge amount of literature concerned about active involvement of end-users in the development process [5, 6]. The basic idea is that people are acknowledged as experts in their own lives. This point of view implies that experts from various professions can benefit from everyday experts' and other professionals' contributions, experiences and knowledge in order to design and develop the best products, solutions or services.

Also within design research there is an increasing emphasis on the value of user experience and knowledge in the design process. For example Margolin (1997) is especially interested in the designer-user relation and suggests four dimensions to consider: the social, inventive, operational and aesthetic dimension. In the section about aesthetic dimension he emphasises that even though the designers focus is not only form and product appearance these are still central concerns for designers. He argues for an expansion of design knowledge into knowledge of user experience [7]. Recent years of design research has elaborated on this knowledge especially within interaction design and product design. Usually design conferences have tracks related to user-experience/user-driven innovation (e.g. Nordes, EAD, IASDR) and journals such as Co-design and Design Studies publish articles on the subject.

Redström (2006) emphasises that users are not just users but people living their lives. He points to the fact that people – like designers, can only predict the use of not-yet existing objects. In that way they are not really users. They become users in the moment that they actually begin to use an object. Use is also, in the words of Redström: "...a kind

of an on-going achievement, the result of a continuous process of encounters with objects and how one acts upon them” [8]. He emphasises that certain awareness to these dilemmas is needed when we as designers invite users and other stakeholders to contribute with their experience and knowledge in the design process.

An exploratory approach

This project investigates if a way of empathising with stakeholders or users could be to actively explore aesthetic appeal and sensuous qualities together in order to establish a dialogue about soft and non-verbal issues such as emotional values in textile design.

Brandt et al. (2008) suggests a game structure where the rules and requisites are a guide for active participation allowing the participants to act as experts in their own everyday lives [9]. The work of Brandt et al has its roots in the so-called Scandinavian approach; an action-oriented research approach developed in the 1970es. The Scandinavian approach is a work-oriented design approach based on participation and skills. Since the early 1990es it has been included in the international Participatory Design society [10].

Within participatory design it is common to work with approaches more than fixed methods. This is an opportunity for design research projects to fit into the actual context. As suggested by Brandt et al a starting point for planning a design game could therefore be: A collaborative activity guided by simple and explicit rules and supported by pre-defined gaming materials pointing towards existing practices and/or future possibilities; playing is taking place in a confined and shared spatial setting; the purpose is to explore novel configurations of game materials and the present and future practices to which these materials point; and finally at the end of the game the players will have produced representations of one or more possible design options [9].

Across the field of design research there are reports on participation and how to enable lay people to participate in and contribute to professional's work. This author has explored in various ways how to empathise with people in order to get access to their experiences with upholstery fabrics in office chairs. In this paper one pilot-study will function as an example showing how the designer can act as a facilitator. This particular workshop was an eye-opener for designers in the collaborating company. They experienced – by trying it themselves, that a game structure is a way to enable people to elaborate on and contribute to the understanding of non-verbalised experiences and developing of emotional values.

A design game

The idea of design games was introduced to two of the designers in the company by actually playing a game. Besides from the underlying introduction-of-approach motive the purpose with this particular game was to explore an idea for a new project from an emotional point of view. In the actual study it was decided to create a board game.

Figure 3 A design game based on Jordan's 4 pleasures.



The inspiration for designing the board came from Jordan [11]. He emphasises the need for a holistic view on users and offers a framework called the 4 pleasures; Physio-, psyko-, socio-, and ideo-pleasure. Physio-pleasure is about the body and the senses. Psyko-Pleasure is about understanding things and emotional states. Socio-pleasure is about relationships. Ideo-pleasure includes tastes, values and aspirations. In order to concretise emotional values the board was divided into four zones of pleasure as defined by Jordan.

The triadic difference as it is defined in the interview-technique repertory grid was used as an inspiration for the game rules. The triadic difference is defined as follows: Taking three elements and asking: How are two alike opposed to the third [12]? This question is a very good starting point for articulation and dialogue [13].

In order to point at existing as well as future possibilities the game pieces were a pile of thumbnail images showing fabrics designed by the company upholstered in various ways and in various settings. These images originated from the company homepage. Furthermore there was a deck of statement cards. The statements were made earlier by one designer and the author of this paper as an initial approach to the subject. The statements were based on a 'public' report about new office trends [14].

2 designers and the author of this paper participated in the game. The author (herself a textile designer) was the facilitator of the game. The time frame was one hour which allowed us to play 3 (TJEK) rounds. For a start each of us picked 10 thumbnail images for a personal image bank.

We now took turns. After turning a statement card the rule was to choose 3 images from the pile of 10 which could be identified with the statement. After that the following question was asked: How are two alike opposed to the third? One by one we formed a bipolar construct and made a new statement for each pole. Then we placed our image/statement-combination on one of the pleasure zones.

A few weeks later a similar game was played with three employees from the company (who were considered to be end-users) and the author as facilitator. The board was slightly changed since the zones were altered into: 'my workspace', 'me', 'my body' and 'the world'. Everything besides that was similar.

Preliminary results

During these two studies we learned that the game setting helped us to handle experiences and emotional values in a detailed way. We experienced that designers as well as non-designers were able to express experiences and emotional values.

After the first game we had a short debriefing. Both designers expressed how this had been a (more or less unexpected) positive experience. They emphasised how interesting it had been to focus only on emotional values during the game:

“A: This is perfect. It’s really interesting working like this. B: Yes, it makes you think. It’s a success. A: Yes, it really makes you think. What I think is so great is that this is based on values. Nobody mentions functionality and how things are going to be designed, it’s all about values” (audio recording translated from Danish to English by author).

In a trade with a strong focus on technical and functional parameters this was a very strong experience. In the end of the debriefing the designers had second thoughts on the approach and urged me to set up another game for some non-designers. Funnily enough these non-designers in their debriefing told me that I had to consider that they were special because they worked as employees in this very innovative company! They actually urged me to set up a play for other people from outside the company. At that time I didn’t do that. I reasoned (based on research literature) that when designers as well as employees coming from other professions agreed in an experience of being especially equipped for participating in the design game it was because of the game structure. The exploratory approach encouraged all of them to feel as experts.

Future work

These studies were conducted in June 2008. It is an ongoing research project with a deadline by the end of 2009. So far no final conclusions have been made on the contribution to the design process. Also the role as facilitator has to be explored in-depth. During the spring of 2009 a series of workshops are planned to investigate this.

The aim is to contribute to the design-product-user field with a focus on emotional values. Research in textile design is a relatively new research field in Denmark. Furthermore this author has found only a small amount of research literature in English or Scandinavian languages with a special focus on textile design and emotional values. As such the project will contribute to the textile design field within design research. It will propose a model for concretising the textile design knowledge of ‘emotional values’ (aesthetic appeal and sensuous qualities) and a series of dialogue tools will be developed to enable the designer to facilitate stakeholders’ and end-users’ contribution to the design process.

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