

Introduction

Nordic Design Cultures in Transformation, 1960–1980

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Mainstream attention to Nordic design, whether contemporary or historical, tends to be predominantly aesthetic in nature and to feed off a distinct and distinctive variety of ‘mid-century modern’. In this book, we argue that the roots of the most prominent features of Nordic design’s contemporary significance are not to be found amongst the ‘gourmet objects’ for the home collectively branded as ‘Scandinavian Design’ to great acclaim in the 1950s – but in the discourses, institutions, and practices formed in the aftermath of that oft-told success story, during the socially, culturally, politically, and economically turbulent period between 1960 and 1980. This period saw profound transformations of Nordic design cultures through dramatic changes to the production systems, consumption regimes, economic policies, and ideological paradigms in which they were enmeshed. But unlike the previous ‘golden era’, it has received surprisingly little attention. The transformative period of the 1960s and 1970s proved challenging to traditional design practices, but also spurred on important new initiatives in fields such as design activism, social design, ergonomics, user participation, and ecological sustainability (Brunnström 2004; Robach 2010; Korvenmaa 2012; Zetterlund 2014; Lundahl 2015; Lie 2016; Jensen and Munch 2020; Fallan 2022). These arenas became crucial in forging new design cultures in the region, and because the concerns, challenges, and debates regarding these topics are no less pressing today than they were half a century ago, this history of revolt and resilience in Nordic design cultures is more relevant than ever.

This book explores historical developments and changes in the professional networks, discourses, institutions, and practices which made design from the Nordic countries in the late 1970s something very different from Scandinavian Design in its heyday of the 1950s. The relatively homogenous, but also narrow-gauged understanding of what design was, should, and could be, gave way to a far more complex and diverse discourse and experimental attitude. In the ranks of critics and practitioners alike, voices of dissent expressed concern for design’s conventional role as an integral part of the consumer society, and called for design and designers to engage in other activities and arenas. But even commercially oriented design cultures underwent significant changes during the period. The 1960s saw not only a veritable revolution in the field of fashion, but also profound changes in consumption patterns and lifestyles moving away from the mid-century ideal of ‘easy living’. At the same time, rapid developments in production technology and artificial materials facilitated new forms, styles, and products, but also new ways of designing and collaborating. Even the term

‘design’ itself changed both in content and use, for example, through the consolidation of industrial design as a domain in its own right and the increasing attention to design of public spaces and services (Wildhagen 1988, 187–214; Fallan 2007).

In the wake of broad structural developments, including international free trade, consolidations in industry, technological innovation, and specialisation came also growing critiques of the social and ecological unsustainability of production and consumption. This reinvigorated critical debates at the design schools, in the professions, and in the broader public about the uses and abuses of design. International exchanges and transnational circulations of ideas were integral to these debates. Perhaps the most paradigmatic example is the case of the Austrian-American designer and critic Victor Papanek, who in the late 1960s and early 1970s spent extended periods at and made brief visits to the design schools of Helsinki, Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen – experiences which in turn significantly informed his internationally influential social design criticism (Lie 2016; Clarke 2021, 197–208). This activism tapped into a broader range of socially engaged projects in Nordic design education and practice with an impact far beyond the region, including the development of participatory methodologies in educational, activist, and professional contexts (see Chapters 1, 4, 5, and 11), as well as in the practice of designers working with communities with disabilities (Guffey 2018, 125–130). Designers and design institutions were also deeply involved in the demonstrations and alternative programmes organised in response to the official agenda of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 (Scott 2016; Fallan 2022).

Equally important is that this was a change that did not just happen within institutions but was an engagement that went far beyond, as this is a decade where long-standing civil rights movements gained increased visibility. Perhaps the most well-known example in a design context is second-wave feminism, organising for women’s rights in society. An engagement that became apparent in exhibitions as well as in an interest in craft, and especially in the field of textiles. However, there were several civil rights movements during this period, among them we find for instance LGBTQ+ rights groups, as well as Roma and indigenous Sámi organising themselves (Lantto and Mörkenstam 2008; Mohtadi 2019; Selling 2020; Cubbin 2022). It is an engagement that does not just argue for changes in current society, but also in how history has been understood and written. History became a tool for change (Zetterlund 2019). By examining the impact of various socially and politically charged intellectual currents, this book portrays Nordic design cultures in rapid and profound transformation.

Nordic designers have been regarded as social engineers, contributing to the organisation and promotion of the region’s highly valued welfare states (Råberg 1970; Mattsson and Wallenstein 2010; Dahlkild 2020). However, the relationships between designers, markets, and institutions changed in the course of these two decades, which mark the largest expansion of the Nordic welfare states, but also their first signs of crisis (Kettunen and Petersen 2021, 20–25). Design activism, social utopian spaces, and public design were some of the responses emerging from designers. Today, the critical, imaginative thinking of the late 1960s and 1970s is often re-invoked as inspiration for finding alternative ways of practicing design and how to formulate design in society. Nordic designers were a significant part of the international movement that has inspired such reappraisal, which makes it important to investigate the region’s local conditions and developments, potentials, and failures. A salient point

of divergence is that where US activists often formed counter-cultures of self-supply, Nordic designers engaged more in public projects – and many enjoyed stronger institutional support (Jensen and Munch 2020). As both the welfare states and the alternative movements of the period are reassessed today, it is crucial to discuss both the Nordic Model and the role and contributions of design, beyond its function as a ‘brand’ (Mordhorst 2021), on the basis of historical investigations into the period.

Since the developments of the late 1960s and 1970s have often been characterised as a period of decay following the ‘golden age’ of Scandinavian Design, scholarship on this epoch has been sparse. Furthermore, understanding these transformations of Nordic design cultures across discourses, institutions, and practices involves studying different kinds of objects, actors, and archives, which in turn calls for different kinds of investigations. These kinds of historical materials do not conform to the usual suspects populating design exhibitions or coffee table books, and therefore require other modes of engagement with actors and communities, exhibitions and debates, for example, through the use of oral history, grey literature, and private archives (Lie 2017). By prioritising discourses, institutions, and practices rather than products and individuals, we not only provide a suitable framework for the discussion of design cultures in transformation, but simultaneously demonstrate a key methodological transformation of the field: From a preoccupation with form, objecthood, and creation towards a focus on ideologies, critique, and systems. This book explores new ways of investigating, comparing, and interpreting the different domains of design culture across the Nordic countries, with a specific focus on the significant transformations in the 1960s and 1970s. Key to this aim is employing multidisciplinary approaches to connect the domains of industrial production, marketing, consumption, public institutions, design education, and trade journals, as well as public debates and civic initiatives forming a design culture (Julier et al. 2019). Furthermore, the project makes a significant contribution to current, international agendas of historiographical critique, focusing on transnational relationships and the deconstruction of national design histories (Fallan and Lees-Maffei 2016).

The contributions of this anthology have been developed through a series of workshops, gathering a broad group of design historians across the Nordic countries and beyond. This collaboration was only made possible by a *NOS-HS grant for Explorative Workshops*, 2019–2021, awarded by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils in Humanities and Social Sciences. Our explorations have been investigations into new aspects of design culture in this period, hitherto more or less ignored in Nordic design history, as well as new ways of collaborating – actively encouraging co-authorship to foster transnational and comparative studies, enrolling the voices of time witnesses and historical actors through interviews, and gathering researchers from a more interdisciplinary field, beyond design museums and universities. The collaborative methodologies underpinning the book also mirror the transition towards collaborative design processes that constitute one of the shifts we observe in the design cultures of the period examined here. Besides this book project, we have also reached out to the Nordic design museums and developed ideas for how to research and display the design culture of this period, where the well-known designer names and iconic objects played a less significant role. It has been a challenge for museums to show the transformations of the years between 1960 and 1980, because the period is not well represented in their collections, and it does not fit smoothly into the usual narratives and permanent displays. This project has revealed a need for museum

researchers to investigate, interpret, and show this period in new ways, focussing more on discourses, institutions, and practices. Among our participants, we have had representatives from many Nordic museums related to design, and we hope to have initiated a continuous dialogue, inspired by the topic of the book.

No project of this nature can be exhaustive in terms of topics covered. The sheer richness and diversity of transformations, experiments, and developments that characterise the two decades under scrutiny here constitute our strongest argument for focusing on this particular period – but it also means that the 14 chapters which follow can only ever provide a partial picture of how Nordic design cultures changed. For instance, we devote considerable attention to the rise of ecology and environmentalism as new influences on design discourse, as well as to issues of social justice. Conversely, the book does not to any great extent discuss the impact of the many civil rights movements that were strong agents of change in the period and thus could have warranted closer consideration. Design schools and museums dominate among the institutions featuring in this book, whereas the roles played by archives, libraries, associations, organisations, governmental bodies, etc. will have to be deliberated in future studies. If the potentially relevant discourses and institutions are many, the corresponding number of practices through which transformations could be traced is virtually countless. Our selection includes the design of work management systems, of clothing, of coop-organised craft and of books. And while all of these in different ways exemplify crucial shifts in how design was practiced and under which conditions, alternative takes on this task could have taken account of, say, the design of public services, of retail spaces, of consumer electronics, and the emerging role of computers and other new technologies as key factors in transforming design practices.

The book is structured in three parts, each examining transformations of Nordic design culture in different arenas or levels of abstractions, from discourse, via institutions, to practices. Part I sets the tone by focusing on key topics defining the intellectual and political climate of the period, including environmentalism, activism, social justice, and indigenous rights. In Chapter 1, Kjetil Fallan shows how the emergence of ecological design was characterised by close and reciprocal interrelations between ideology and methodology. Spurred into action by wider knowledge of the ecological crisis, designers, critics, educators, students, and activists struggled to find new answers to the questions of what design should be, and how it should be practiced. The chapter draws on examples from the fields of design education and design activism, where the interaction between ideology and methodology arguably was particularly prominent, since both education and activism are ideologically charged and methodologically explicit. In this manner, Fallan argues that the dynamic relation between the *why* and the *how* was integral to the shaping of ecological design as it made its way north. In Chapter 2, Anders V. Munch and Hans-Christian Jensen offer a close reading of the term ‘environment’ (*miljø*) in Danish design discourse around 1970. If it is an unruly concept today, it was no less so half a century ago when concerns about the natural environment and the built environment alike assumed unprecedented political currency, both in public and professional debates. Munch and Jensen demonstrate that the term acquired a broad range of meanings, from the decidedly abstract to the specifically concrete, and argue that this fluid conception facilitated new directions in the vivid discussions at the time over what design should be and where it should be heading – but that the same, indeterminacy also rendered constructive exchanges across different design disciplines more challenging. The theme of environmentalism

is pursued further by Beata Labuhn in Chapter 3, where she documents a little-known example of how architectural students in Sweden and Norway in the late 1960s engaged in the public dissemination of knowledge about the ecological crisis. Drawing on the work of public intellectuals and concerned scientists, these students organised travelling exhibitions which proved to be surprisingly effective in bringing design and environmentalism into conversation. Retaining the notion of exhibitions as a mode of design activism, Chapter 4 takes the form of a conversation between Christina Zetterlund and Gunilla Lundahl, a journalist, educator, curator, and activist who was a key figure in the Swedish and Nordic design scene in the 1960s and 1970s. Looking back at her activities in this period, Lundahl argues that the major and lasting value of the experimental exhibition projects she worked on lies not so much in the end results as in their planning and development, and, more importantly, how the social involvement did not end with the exhibition but continued in other grass-root initiatives. Offering another take on the trope of community, in Chapter 5, Malin Graesse and Kaisu Savola show through two different case studies how craft was by designers perceived as a tool for rural development. From highly diverging organisational origins, their Norwegian and Finnish case studies demonstrate a shared – and perhaps naïve – belief in the power of traditional craft-based production systems to mitigate the detrimental effects of industrialisation and centralisation on rural communities. The chapter analyses these initiatives and examines agency in how the projects were formulated and staged. This question reappears in Chapter 6, where Anna Westman Kuhmunen starts in the second wave of the Sámi rights movement and shows how *duodji* (Sámi handicraft) became a prominent part of this transnational mobilisation. She also analyses differences between when Sámi craft was formulated from within Sámi society, and when it was staged from the outside, by institutions representing the Swedish majority society.

In Part II, we move from the above discussions of the broader ideological discourses to examination of how these were reflected in, and responded to by key institutions in the design field, such as organisations, museums, and schools. In Chapter 7, Peder Valle, Sabina Maria Rossau, and Leena Svinhufvud take a closer look at three exhibitions which sought in different ways to address the rapidly changing and expanding understanding of design in this period. The case studies, from Norway, Finland, and Denmark, reveal that institutions founded in the 19th century found it challenging to come to grips with the new social and cultural meaning of industrial design articulated in the 1960s. Neither the historical-aesthetic approach of decorative art museums nor the commercial logic of promotional organisations proved very apt at conceptualising design as an agent of social change. These exhibitions thus pinpointed the need to develop new curatorial strategies better suited to contemporary design culture. Like higher education in general, Nordic design schools became the sites and subjects of rebellions and reforms in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Pekka Korvenmaa discusses in Chapter 8 how Helsinki's traditional arts and crafts school during these years was transformed into the region's first dedicated university of art and design, and how this process unfolded under the long shadow of the cold war. The government intended for the reformed, upgraded institution to supply and serve the manufacturing industry – but like most art and design schools, it was populated by students and teachers of a decidedly leftist bent, who did not necessarily agree. Korvenmaa posits that what started as leftist radicalism, much like at other schools throughout western Europe, soon developed into a conformist type of Marxist-Leninism, which

arguably turned the institution into a sleeping cell of Kremlin-loyal subjects awaiting the communist revolution. Driven less by global geopolitics and more by demands for individual creative freedom and increased student participation in institutional governance, the rebellions at the Danish design schools are the focus of the next two chapters. Chapter 9 brings the historical actors themselves to the stage in the form of an interview with three designers who were students at the schools at the time, and active participants in the since-mythologised events some fifty years ago. In Chapter 10, Anders V. Munch, Alison Clarke, Vibeke Riisberg, and Lene Kiærbye Pedersen complement and contextualise the interviews by fleshing out the history of the revolts and reforms at the Danish design schools. Their analysis also places these events in an international perspective by tracing the ambivalent role played by Victor Papanek when he was a visiting professor in Copenhagen during these tumultuous times.

Part III shifts the attention from institutions to practices and professions, asking how designers both responded and contributed to the broader social, cultural, economic, and technological shifts of the period. Whether working in/for the industry or seeking alternative modes of practice, the role of the designer and the nature of the work they performed underwent significant changes. Even the very definition of what design was and who designers were, was in play. For instance, as Maria Göransdotter shows in Chapter 11, user-centred, or participatory design emerged in unexpected circumstances. This entirely new methodology for structuring a de-centred and inclusive design process, which is largely considered a Nordic specialty, was not concocted in a design school or a consultancy office – it was developed beyond the pale of conventional design circles, chiefly in the context of public sector organisations and heavy industry implementing new work-management systems, which often included computer technology and where labour unions were key actors. But even time-honoured design work such as that in the textile industry was thoroughly transformed by technological developments and the surge in international free trade. In Chapter 12, comparing Norwegian and Danish cases, Tone Rasch and Trine Brun Petersen examine how the figure of the fashion designer rose from the ashes of older professional identities and helped constitute a new and increasingly distinct discourse which moved fashion away from other branches of design. For some designers, though, the habitual role of their trade as the handmaiden of industry and commercialism grew ever more uncomfortable, leading them to explore other options. In Chapter 13, Tau Ulv Lenskjold charts one such effort, the Elverhøj cooperative store in Copenhagen, which became a vibrant and long-lasting venue, connecting and supporting a network of predominantly female designers who through this initiative found ways to combine creative practice, economic sustenance, ideological integrity, and family life, which could be challenging to achieve in conventional careers at the time. If the established structures and understandings which underpinned the renowned and stereotyped Scandinavian design culture of the 1950s were contested in the ensuing period by the kind of grass-root initiatives described by Lenskjold on one side, it was simultaneously challenged from the diametrically opposite side by overtly commercial interests. As a final example of the transformations of practice in this tumultuous period, Thomas Nordby in Chapter 14 shows how book design moved from the realm of artists and printing professionals to the domain of graphic designers, as the Norwegian publishing industry reorganised in response to and as part of the rapid democratisation of culture and education. The pocketbook revolution and the tidal wave of textbooks combined to thoroughly recast both the cultural

image and the social function of the book as a medium and object, thus requiring a new approach to its design as well.

By reading this history through the three levels – or arenas – of discourse, institutions, and practice, we arrive at a complex, yet structured understanding of the profound transformation of Nordic design cultures in the period from 1960 to 1980.

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