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Savola, Kaisu

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‘With whom do you feel your solidarity’ – Developing a Socially Conscious Design Practice in 1960s Finland

Kaisu Savola
Aalto-yliopisto, Helsinki

1960s / Finland / Design education / Social responsibility

This paper explores how and why the notion of design changed during the late 1960s in Finland and argues that the main driver of this change was a new generation of design students. These students were not satisfied with the Finnish design culture, which relied heavily on the international success it had gained in the 1950s with exclusive handcrafted objects. Design

education still supported the idea of the designer as an artist and the produced objects as tokens of individual expression. Many design students felt that this failed to address the needs of an increasingly dysfunctional city environment. The students’ protest was shaped by ideals of international solidarity, while it also questioned the real extent of prosperity created

by the welfare state. By organising state-funded symposia, producing ambitious publications, and collaborating with other disciplines, the students succeeded in developing design towards a more academic and research-based discipline able to offer tangible solutions to real-life problems.

Introduction

In 1998, design historian Victor Margolin wrote that ‘with the exception of [Victor] Papanek, [Buckminster] Fuller, and a few other critics and visionaries, designers have not been able to envision a professional practice outside of the consumer culture’ (MARGOLIN, 1998: 86). This paper shows that, in 1960s Finland, design students, educators and practitioners strove to create what Margolin claims not to exist: a socially responsible design practice. By examining design history as a history of both artefacts and ideologies (FALLAN, 2010), this paper explores how design has been imagined and practiced as a deeply moral and social activity. In addition to providing an insight into a design culture facing drastic change, this paper gives examples of early forms of design work that took into consideration the great amount of injustice and inequality that exists in this world and tried to do something about it. By finding these kinds of examples in history, I hope to create a better understanding of how design has been and could be utilised as a tool to help build equal and sustainable societies.

Design and Social Responsibility

A socially conscious attitude towards design has been a part of the Nordic design tradition ever since the early 20th century, when first Ellen Key and then Gregor Paulsson in Sweden drew inspiration from the Arts&Crafts movement and the Deutscher Werkbund and demanded objects of high artistic and material quality that everyone regardless of their class or social status could afford (ROBACH, 2002). This view of design’s role in building a more equal society shaped the Finnish design field, too, when Alvar Aalto among others advocated this approach in the 1930s. Furthermore, during the post-war reconstruction period, Finnish designers played an essential part in creating the material reality of a welfare state in construction (AALTONEN, 2012). In the 1950s, Finnish design became world-famous when its beautiful objects won awards and toured the world in exhibitions that presented Finland and the rest of the Nordic countries as safe and democratic havens. Successful and prolific designers, such as Tapio Wirkkala and Ilmari Tapiovaara, were celebrated in Finland as national heroes, whose job it was to make life more beautiful, but also to put Finland on the international map.

Making everyday life more beautiful for everyone regardless of their income and status can of course be considered a social and moral responsibility. However, in Finland, the designer’s role has mostly been limited to providing pleasing aesthetic experiences for people. Up until the 1960s, the designer’s line of work was very much confined within the domestic, or within the interiors of public spaces such as schools. This paper shows that, during the 1960s in Finland, a new, widening notion of design based on research and technology extended itself beyond the domestic object and beyond the interiors of homes and public spaces. The whole society became the designer’s workplace, and the designer took on the responsibility to ensure that society would be equal, inclusive and sustainable. This change could first be seen in the way design was talked and written about, and after some time it was also visible in practice: in design education, profession and policies.

There were many elements driving this change. This paper argues that perhaps the most important of them was a vocal group of design students at The Institute of Arts and Crafts in Helsinki, which later became the University of Art and Design. Many students at the Institute, which was still a vocational school at the end of 1960s, had grown tired of idolising Finland’s successful star designers while witnessing the rapid and radical transformation of their living environment, while being influenced by the global movement of student activism and solidarity.

Everyday Life in 1960s Finland

Indeed, one of the greatest sources of discontent in post-Second World War Finland was bad living conditions. This problem was far from resolved in the 1960s, when the country’s fast urbanisation was reaching its peak. Unprecedented amounts of people were moving from the countryside to the cities in search of jobs or education. This, together with the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, is seen to have changed Finnish culture permanently. New factory workers, and especially young families, moved to newly built suburbs, which in the early 1960s were seen as exciting and progressive with their hygienic, wide spaces, monumental scale, and new building techniques that seemingly arrived straight from the future (SARANTOLA-WEISS, 2004).

However, as the 1960s progressed, the suburbs lost their aura of novelty and became a part of everyday life, while gaining the reputation of not only being sleepy, dull and ugly, but also causing social problems, such as alcoholism and alienation (SAARIKANGAS, 2004). The city centre of the country's capital, Helsinki, was going through a radical transformation, too, since it was to become the centre for business and government. This meant that many old buildings, residential and commercial, were replaced with new, anonymous office blocks or shopping centres. The restrictions on car imports had been removed in 1962, which made the amount of private car ownership grow at a high pace; between the years 1960 and 1966, the number of cars grew from 25,800 to 602,000 (SAARIKANGAS, 2004). Together these elements created a chaotic and dysfunctional urban environment that citizens found difficult and unpleasant to live and work in. Meanwhile, in an increasing amount of Finnish living rooms, television sets were, for the first time in history, broadcasting the horrors of the Vietnam War, or the Cold War rhetoric with a threat of a nuclear war, the Moon Landing, the Civil Rights movement in America, or violent student protests across Europe.

Describing Finland during the 1960s, Finnish historian Jukka Relander suggests that the changes in both the infrastructure and the immaterial structures of society were drastic; Finnish culture was suddenly detached from the past and thrown into the whirlwind of international influences, mass media and entertainment, and the radicalisation of youth culture (RELANDER, 2004). Student radicalism first emerged already in the late 1950s when Helsinki University's student magazine began to publish controversial material, such as texts supporting conscientious objection and articles ridiculing important figures in Finland's history (KLINGE and HARMO, 1983). While the students' activities might have seemed shocking, or just ridiculous, for the wider audience, they received support from Finland's president Urho Kekkonen, whose politics were pushing for social, economic and educational reform to help create a more equal society and to challenge the position of the aging elite (RELANDER, 2004). The atmosphere among students in the 1960s was marked by both frustration towards the conservative values of their parents' and the world leaders' generation, but also a realisation that through their own actions they had the power and possibility to make changes in society.

Design Education in 1960s Finland

While the university students in Finland had been protesting for renewal of stuffy conservative values and for students' rights since late 1950s, design education in the country remained as unambitious vocational schooling based on individual artistic expression and learning about materials and techniques to produce award-winning beautiful objects. Not only did many design students find the subjects taught inadequate, un-academic and out-of-date, but also lacking in providing tools for the future designers to make a positive impact on a society that was facing challenges such as environmental pollution, poverty and inequality. These frustrations were vented in numerous student publications (Fig. 1) and exhibitions. Maria Laukka, who studied graphic art at The Institute for Arts and Crafts in the early 1960s, gives a vivid description of the methods of studying:

We had a schedule from 8 to 5 every day, on Saturdays the day was slightly shorter. [We were] working silently by our desks, received very few instructions, and almost no reading. [...] The teachers would do their rounds once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Rest of the time they would sit in the teachers' lounge, smoking. [...] While teaching, they would give oracle-like instructions. The most commonly heard comment was an absent-minded "carry on" (LAUKKA, 1999: 203).

Perhaps understandably so, this kind of teaching and interaction were not enough for the students who were eager to learn how to solve complex societal



Fig. 1 Illustration from a design student magazine from 1966, alluding to conflicts between the faculty and the students (Aalto University Archive).

challenges. However, the students did receive some support for their growing ambitions from within The Institute for Arts and Crafts, more specifically from the Institute's artistic leader, designer Kaj Franck. During his courses, together with his young assistants Harry Moilanen, Severi Parko and Teemu Lipasti, he underlined the importance of the designer's responsibilities, which, according to Franck, included using as little natural resources and materials as possible, and considering the needs of the socially marginalised. His courses included assignments such as designing and building a playground for children and temporary dwellings for the city's homeless, both tasks employing waste materials and derelict areas in Helsinki.

More importantly, an engaged group of design students took action of their own. In addition to organising exhibitions and publishing magazines, they started an international organisation with design students from other Nordic countries, who were facing similar issues in their home institutions. This organisation, called sdo, or Skandinaviske Designstudenterandes Organisation (Scandinavian Design Students' Organisation), advocated first and foremost for a better, more academic and ambitious design education that would give students abilities to respond to the complexities

they were facing in the world surrounding them. As the back of the organisation's second magazine from 1968 explicitly stated, the students wanted nothing less than to 'save the world'. In addition to these publications, together the students wrote and published opinionated pieces in newspapers and even wrote petitions for governments, but perhaps most importantly, they arranged a range of influential seminars and symposia that received wide-spread attention in both professional design magazines and the wider media.

'Industry, Environment, Product Planning'. One of the most influential and ambitious events that the design students arranged was the 'Industry, Environment, Product Planning' symposium that took place on an island outside Helsinki in the summer of 1968. The symposium was planned together with engineering and architecture students, and, quite remarkably, it was funded by SITRA, the newly established research fund of the Finnish state. This gave additional weight and importance to the event, since the subject matter was considered so significant and timely that the state was willing to fund it. The goal of the symposium was to find new, cross-disciplinary approaches to the education and practice of product design, that would take into consideration its moral, social and environmental consequences. According to the symposium proceedings, during the first part of the symposium in the beginning of July, the focus was on industrial design and social responsibility, and the future of technology. The second part included talks about innovation, industrial design processes and design methods, and the development of design education. The cross-disciplinary approach was visible in the range of invited speakers, including Buckminster Fuller, Victor Papanek, and Kaj Franck, but also a group from the Royal College of Art's Design Research Unit and the famous Swedish environmentalist Hans Palmstierna. These notable speakers were joined by Finnish and international designers, engineers, psychologists, architects and economists. The programme leaflet distributed to visitors presented each theme and topic while carefully ra-

tionalising them, making links between industry, society and education by utilising words and concepts such as product design, technology, innovation, methods, and process.

Linking design, technology and research together with society was clearly a sign of the influence of the emergence of a more scientific and systematic approach to design that had mainly taken place in England at the Royal College of Art and in Germany at the Ulm School of Design. Even though the roots of the so-called 'scientification' of design can be seen to stretch as far as the Dutch De Stijl group in the 1920s (BAYAZIT, 2004), the ideas disseminated at the Suomenlinna symposium were stemming from England and Germany, where, according to design historian Nigan Bayazit, 'due to technological developments and the implications of mass production, interest had to be shifted from hardware and form to the consideration of human needs', which in turn required 'a new look at the subject of design method' (BAYAZIT, 2004: 18). Bringing these international ideas forward to a wider public in Finland might have been the most significant accomplishment of the symposium.

As described earlier in this paper, this more comprehensive approach to design was already gaining a foothold in Finland emerging from the design students' desire to interact, not just with products for domestic use, but the whole dysfunctional surroundings of the man-made environment. Moreover, these thoughts spoke straight to the minds of those who were actively involved in turning The Institute of Arts and Crafts in Helsinki, still a vocational school, into a university-level institution and thus gaining the long-awaited academic status that the fellow disciplines, such as architecture and engineering, had been holding for decades. According to design historian Jane Pavitt, 'using organisational methods drawn from science, technology and communications theory, and through processes of analysis and evaluation, design could be undertaken in a "scientific" way' (PAVITT, 2012: 133). This would in turn mean that design would be taken more seriously and gain

a more solid foothold in society, giving designers possibilities of making a difference on a greater scale.

Playgrounds and Slaughterhouses

During the Suomenlinna symposium in the summer of 1968, these ambitious plans of so-called 'scientification' of design met the prevailing ideals of the designer's social responsibility in an intriguing way. This could be best seen in the tangible results of the symposium, which were planned and conceived in group workshops. The first group's task was to design a playground for children suffering from cerebral palsy, while the second group designed a mobile reindeer slaughterhouse. Both assignments required extensive research into the user experience of the products, in the playground case disabled children and in the reindeer slaughterhouse case Finland's only indigenous people, the Sami in Lapland, whose main livelihood was reindeer farming. Moreover, both assignments reflected well the designer's widened line of work as someone whose responsibility is not only confined within the domestic, but extends itself to all kinds of facets of human life and all kinds of corners of our living environment, be it children's play or the traditional Sami lifestyle.

These projects explored the idea of design as a research activity needing an objective, scientific approach, but they can also be considered as early examples of design anthropology. Design historian Alison J. Clarke traces the design community's interest in the anthropological back to the emergence of a critical design culture in the 1960s, which 'sought to strip away the layers of "false" meaning around commercial products' (CLARKE, 2013: 74). In this process, anthropology's aim of revealing the different layers in human, social and cultural interactions functioned as an alternative to designing for the capitalist commodity culture. Designing the mobile reindeer slaughterhouse to be used by the Sami therefore reflected the newly found interest towards supporting alternative lifestyles and values that existed outside the consumer culture. The project was fuelled by the introduction of a new law in Finland demanding better hygiene

for slaughtering kettles, without any promise of funding to help build permanent slaughterhouses to meet these demands. The aim of designing the portable slaughterhouse, then, was to secure the Sami's traditional livelihood and ensure that their lifestyle could be sustained.

Bringing about Permanent Change in Finnish Design Culture

The symposium was widely reported in the media, in both newspapers and magazines, and even on Finnish national television. Even though many of the details of the symposium remain unclear, such as how many people participated, how the workshops were arranged, and if the prototypes created during the workshops were ever put into production, it's evident that the symposium managed to bring increasing attention to the students' agenda suggesting that design and its education had to evolve in order to keep up with the rapidly changing society. Moreover, it spoke of the need and interest for a university-level institution for design education.

Five years after the Suomenlinna seminar, in 1973, the University of Art and Design Helsinki (previously The Institute of Arts and Crafts) finally opened its doors as the first university-level design school in the Nordic countries. At least partly resulting from the students' efforts during the previous years and the active debate they had created, the design studies curriculum had been revised, and the notion of design's social and moral responsibility towards people and the environment could be seen both in the rhetoric and actions upon the first semester at the new University (KORVENMAA, 2012). In addition to subject-based studying, students were now given assignments in the form of collaborative and multidisciplinary group projects, the objective being to create solutions to real-life problems. One of the assignments, for instance, was to design a new living environment for the Skolt Sami minority who had been evicted from their place of origin after the Second World War, due to the Soviet Union claiming the land. The communal lifestyle of the Sami, as well as their means of livelihood, were to be taken into consideration when designing the environment, and the report from the project revealed rigorous research into the Skolt Sami culture, as well as collaboration between the students, governmental authorities, and environmental and architectural experts. Other assignments included designing ergonomic workstations for electronic engineers, renewing the safety measurements for the process of casting concrete, and researching the craft traditions in Northern Karelia, a region on the border of Finland and Russia.

In addition to creating change in design education, the design students' ideas about the widened role of design in shaping the man-made environment continued living in the professional practice of Finnish designers. Echoing the design students' actions, Finland's professional organisation for designers, Ornamo, began organising seminars, one of which was called 'With whom do you feel your solidarity' (Fig. 2). Even Finland's interior design magazines started to publish, among articles about swimming pools and Japanese-style stone gardens, lengthy texts about the state of the design profession, interviewing both established designers and 'the younger generation', often drawing attention to the social and political ramifications of design. The articles documented design's new direction, which continued developing further during the 1970s, when many designers engaged in designing for the socially marginalised, creating hospital and healthcare equipment, designing workplace environments, or even traveling to developing countries to work with development aid and NGOs.



Fig. 2 Poster for Ornamo's symposium 'With whom do you feel your solidarity' in 1970 (Aalto University Archive).

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper argues that in 1960s Finland, design students held a key position in developing design towards an academic, collaborative, and a socially and morally responsible professional practice. By organising influential symposia gathering top speakers from within the design world and beyond, and by participating in workshops and creating projects, texts and publications, the students successfully challenged the established notion of design's role and purpose. However, even though the general response to the students' actions remained positive, questions about the most effective ways of creating social equality emerged. Some saw concrete actions, such as design projects aimed at those in need, as the most effective way. Others demanded a more politically conscious attitude that would question the wider structures and mechanisms of society. This led to extreme politicization of student life and cultural fields in general in Finland. The design debate, too, became more and more characterised by political debates, which, on one hand created more confidence in the designers' mission of 'saving the world', but on the other was a divisive factor creating disagreement, and eventually discord.

However, in 1968, the students were still on the same team and wrote the following manifesto in a seminar, this time in Stockholm, Sweden:

Is it possible to design good-looking gadgets when you know that people are starving and suffering; when you have begun to doubt your need for luxury; when you are scared to death knowing that a catastrophe is right behind the door??? Out of compassion towards the world's hungry, suffering, and oppressed people facing population explosion, environmental pollution and earth's dwindling resources, we want to do our best to make a difference by creating a growing consciousness about the world's problems and finding out what we can do about them (LUNDAHL, 1968: 440).

This manifesto not only shows the urgency with which the students faced complex societal issues, but also the extent to which they saw design belonging at the forefront in the creation of a democratic and socially equal society.

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Kaisu Savola is a doctoral candidate at Aalto University, Finland. Her research focuses on ways in which design has been imagined and used as a tool in creating a more sustainable and socially just world. Her doctoral dissertation is about social, moral and political values in Finnish design education in the past 50 years.

kaisu.savola@aalto.fi