NORWEGIAN GENERAL DESIGN EDUCATION – DEVELOPING THE SCANDINAVIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

When design education is addressed as a conference theme or research topic, there is a tendency to list it as a theme concerning higher education. However, design education has to be seen in a wider perspective, as a more complex field, which also include general design education of users and clients. Design touches the lives of all through physical objects and built environments surrounding everyday actions. Awareness concerning choices that affect these actions, products, or environment, is vital to secure democratic influence. The inclusion of those affected by a decision in the design process might be fruitless if it is not built upon prequalification within design issues. The National Curriculum for general education in Norway, effected in 2006, include such prequalification for user participation in design processes.

1. A SCANDINAVIAN PERSPECTIVE

The thoughts of local influence are strong within the political traditions of social democracy that are practised in the Scandinavian countries. The Scandinavian Design movement grew post World War II out of the particular Scandinavian form of social democracy. It evolved from the thought that beautiful and functional everyday objects should be made affordable not only to the few, but to all. Functional and stylish products in a minimalist form were designed for mass production. IKEA is one of the legacies of this tradition. Despite some critical voices rooted in the 60ies and 70ies (Ask 2004), the social democratic ideals that sparked the movement still resound in contemporary design, and some of the ideas are still prevailing in the current context.

User participation in design processes have been practiced and discussed since the 70ies within the professional design and planning communities (Bratteteig and Bjerknes 1995; Pløger 2002). The experiences and outcomes are not uniform. Not all studies are positive. In an assessment on user participation in mass housing the outcome shows that user satisfaction is such cases are not self evident (Reis 2000). Cooke and Kothari also address critical voices against the outcome of user participation in their book: *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (2001). However, these studies are based on situations were systematic general design education with a focus on prequalification has been lacking. The gap between wanting qualified users and having qualified users in a design process, opens up for reflections concerning prequalification. Will we leave the idea of participation of laymen in the design process, or are there ways to improve the base for user participation? We think the answer is to be discussed in relation to both professional and general design education in the past, in the present and in the future.

1.1. DEMOCRACY – INDIVIDUALISM AND PARTICIPATION

In Norway, the general education in art and design functioned previously rather as a concomitant theme within the tradition of self-expression. This dominant epistemology, that for a long time seemed almost sacrosanct, was both in education theory in general (Bernstein 2000), and general art and design education in particular (Carr 2000), that of an individual orientation. The education turned introspective and in the sociologist Skarpenes' words (2004), the situation was marked by having an increased focus on the individual student over the collective knowledge base. This idea

seems to be more pronounced in the US and to some extent in Europe (Eisner 2002; McFee 1999; Wilson 2004). Skarpenes introduces the concept of 'pedocentrism' and suggests that this development has been on the expense of subject specific knowledge, and that knowledge has been handled as exclusively a private and internally born factor (Skarpenes 2004).

In this context, the thoughts of personal freedom and individual expression, has been misinterpreted as synonymous with democracy. When education is individual in the sense that the individuals' experience and self-realisation sets the parameters, and the inner 'genius' is pronounced as the ideal, the teaching method and attitude become the main aims of education on the expense of subject-matter knowledge. This, together with the misinterpretation of democracy as solely individually oriented is problematic. The critical factor, the reflexive critique in light of a context, the society that constitutes the democracy, is lost (Digranes 2005). If the concept is stretched too far, and the thoughts of education as a tool for social justice and participation for all, is lost in introspection and narcissism, user participation becomes difficult, as the common base for communication within a design process will be non existent.

1.2. AESTHETIC AGENDAS

This introspective attitude could prove a tremendous hindrance in general design education. Views such as that the only means towards securing moral humans, is to independent of – indeed freed from – any teacher or outside agent's involvement and influence, let the inner development of children progress on its own (Read 1945). From this narrow approach towards *bildung,* follows the paradox, that these romantic notions of learning preach the futility of teachers, knowledge and education (Digranes 2006). General design education becomes redundant as aesthetic understanding and development originate from the individual as a 'closed system'. Learning as such becomes agenda free. However, in a society with outspoken consumer orientation, can the aesthetic field be said to be neutral?

Consumer aesthetics will always be the result of an agenda (Duncum 2007). The question then becomes; "What basic design knowledge does the next generation need?" It signals an orientation towards syncretising societal questions with critical thinking, thoughts on aesthetic values and agendas, and local needs. They are seen as sides of the same coin (Digranes 2006). There is an understanding of the fact that the lack of a solid frame of reference outside the individual, a knowledge base from which the products, suggestions and solutions can be

discussed, might prove to lead to less influence than more. The agenda is set by those claiming to 'own' a more comprehensive 'truth', unless at some level the users are made conscious to the fact that they are seduced by rhetoric, visual or otherwise (Cooke 2001). Empowerment through general design education will, in our view, provide a base towards developing democracy also in design processes issues.

1.3. DESIGNDIALOG

The Norwegian educational system builds upon ideals of human equality, ethics, sustainability and democracy. The national curriculum for primary and secondary school, *Kunnskapsløftet* (Kunnskapsdepartementet and Utdanningsdirektoratet 2006), is the point of departure for all further education, and emphasises design knowledge both at the practical and reflexive level. Design has through several national curricula been increasingly emphasized. Design knowledge is today recognized as important for how a society is developed, and design education is consequently seen as self-evident as a core subject. This is a consequence of an epistemological realisation of the fact that democratic processes in the physical environment are as important as in the personal.

In the Norwegian research network *DesignDialog*, there is an ongoing effort towards establishing an understanding of the relevance of a continuous design education from the kindergarten to the doctorate (Nielsen and Digranes 2006, 2005; Nielsen 2004; Nielsen, Aksnes, Reitan, and Digranes 2005). The challenge is to provide research into general design education, in light of the thoughts of human equality, ethics, sustainability and democracy represented in *Kunnskapsløftet*, and how this can function as a basis for specialised education at university level.

2. NORWEGIAN GENERAL DESIGN EDUCATION - NoGDE

In the Scandinavian countries higher design education has a fairly similar structure. General art and design education on the other hand is structured quite differently from country to country (Lindström, Illeris, Nielsen, and Räsänen 2007). Norway is the only Nordic country where the art and crafts traditions are merged into one subject *Kunst og håndverk (Art and Crafts)*. The subject is mandatory from 1st to 10th grade (6-16 years) for approximately 2 supervised classes a week. Even if the subject-matter is organized in the sub categories *visual communication, design, fine art,* and *architecture* they overlap and provide opportunities to launch projects. For design

education this allows for the opportunity to build upon the best from both the art and the crafts traditions. This merge into one broad subject and the development into new sub categories are in our view – together with the Scandinavian social democracy tradition – our contribution to the development of both the general and higher design education, as a solid base for real user participation in every day design processes. Democracy today presupposes not only skills within reading, writing and arithmetic, but also visual literacy in order for laymen to partake in planning their physical surroundings which play an integral part of their lives.

2.1. WHY NoGDE?

The view of design education as purely method is an amputated understanding of education. All subject-matter choices are based upon a more or less conscious philosophy. If the philosophy of design education, at all levels, is not consciously articulated, the education becomes fragmented and random, and supports an atomisation of individuals rather than democratic processes. The challenge is to develop a coherent philosophical base from which the subject-matter choices and reflections can grow, and as a result qualified methodological choices.

To allow design thinking and design knowledge in general education will provide people with a tool towards awareness of their physical environment. This awareness will be present throughout the reflections in everyday life. It will not be an unknown territory for laymen, as seen in some cases at present were they in the capacity of political functions or as consumers, are involved in making decisions concerning development or design solution. Basic knowledge from general education, along with a critical reflection might lay the foundation for a democratic discourse — not only on the political arena but also on the lived arena of local everyday life. A common knowledge base will provide the opportunity to discuss the products and physical environment prior to any projects that might become of importance.

If it is a community question, and a project is initiated, the local discussion will be known to any users that might participate. As such, they participate not on the grounds of individual views, but on the basis of shared reflections. The dangers of egotism, is lessened. The solutions and the aesthetical and ethical has prior discourse references, and as such the unbalance of knowledge and influence can be levelled. In the long run this will hopefully provide better products and services and hence, more satisfied users. At the same time, the involvement in local discourses might enable the individual users to make qualified choices, towards their own needs. In a

situation where they have to choose among options, they might constitute more critical and aware buyers, and not be seduced by unnecessary commercial consumer aesthetics.

One of the dangers addressed by this approach to general design education is inequality in power. The problem of undemocratic decisions, as a result of uninitiated local discourses concerning choices and local needs, is visible not only in the lack of discourse, but also in the uneven alliances between laymen and corporations with economic interests, builders or design professionals.

"…there are many people who do not deliberately ally themselves with the minority interests of the powerful, who are nevertheless caught up, at varying levels, in the momentum of power. And if any real change is to be effected, they have to be reached. We also have to be aware that, in certain instances, the they in question might well be ourselves." (Dunn and Leeson 1993:143)

If problems within the creation of new products or buildings, are seen only by those educated for a specific profession, rather then as a general educational question, it will lead to the exclusion of the *us* in design situations of conflicting interests. In cases where professional knowledge is used to coerce on the user the professional's view, it might turn into a hostage taking situation (Nielsen and Digranes 2007). By their lack of design knowledge in the situation, the users are left no alternative but to agree. Prequalification in design through general education might go a long way towards evening out the power structure in such situations. If the users have the ability and vocabulary to propose critical points of view, the users will have influence on both the project agenda and their local environment. Informed questions will provide the basis for a meaningful dialogue between professionals and laymen.

It is also important to recognise that knowledge among users might lead to a 'win–win' situation where the qualifications of the lay user can contribute to the professional designer's production. Insight into user needs and preferences can give rise to new solutions and unthought-of designs. The design community will profit in these situations, both through more satisfied users and clients, and hopefully through better designs.

2.2. NORWEGIAN GENERAL DESIGN EDUCATION RESEARCH

One of the fundamental tools for building a democracy, and the one arena where there is a possibility of providing an equal access to vital knowledge and discussion is mostly absent in research into design education problems. General design education reaches everyone

irrespective of the later chosen occupation and makes the empowerment of the common man feasible.

Disciplines such as art history, pedagogy, aesthetics, economy and technology have at different times offered perspectives for design education. In Norwegian general design education and teacher training, the pedagogic-psychological perspective, 'self-expression' and 'child art', has to a certain extent dominated (Lowenfeld 1970; Nielsen 2000; Borgen 1995). Education of professional designers has displayed a tendency towards a greater emphasis on style history, aesthetics, economy and technology (Ask 2004; Holm 2006). Thus, design education has been rather firmly anchored in other discipline's theory and design practise, not in a design education theory of its own.

There are challenges within design education research in primary and secondary education, and Norwegian researchers within the field have started to address these issues. What role can general education have as a starting point for further design understanding? General design education has the possibility to introduce awareness into questions concerning the future of the world at large. Does the debate into i.e. ethics, quality or sustainability belong only within the confines of certain professional choices, or is it a debate that concerns all users?

These questions, together with the conflicting ideas between the romantic influenced pedagogical aims and the craftsman tradition in design education practice have for years been a main issue when discussing everyday practise in the general Norwegian design education. Consequently the educational aims for and content of, as well as the discussions on legitimisation of the subject have been important issues for Norwegian researchers. At present studies into how different traditions and philosophies have influenced the everyday practise and outcome in art and design education at different levels are in progress.

Knowledge and skills developed in general art and design education is supposed to function as a base for democratic participation in cultural, social and environmental development of everyday life, where strategic choices have to be made. In such a context the division between the pedagogical paradigm of self-expression and the craftsman tradition of skills are complementary, not contradictory (Nielsen 2007; Digranes 2006). In Norway, these questions and conflicting ideals related to objectives for art and design education are inseparably linked to the legitimisation of the subjects in general education. In *Kunnskapsløftet,* the traditions of creative art, visual culture (inspired by Nordström) the craftsman tradition, and the democracy and empowerment

orientation (inspired by Freire) fuse, and contribute to the children's creation of artefacts with required contextual quality and function (Nielsen 2007). As a result legitimacy of the subject in light of both societal and individual growth and needs is a frequent research topic when studying educational practises in Norway, and calls for a rethinking of the partial philosophies that have been adopted from other disciplines and the understanding of design values as undivided market oriented, or solely a professional issue.

2.3. DOCTORAL PROGRAM FOR DESIGN EDUCATION

When the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO) opened its doctoral programme for practitioners within other fields than architecture in 1995, it indicated a turning point for research within design education. Now artists, designers and educators got the possibility to qualify for research within their own field of practise and knowledge. The leader for the doctoral programme, professor Halina Dunin-Woyseth, has developed an epistemological base for the programme, when introducing the concept of a *making discipline* derived from the challenges for the *making professions* (Dunin-Woyseth and Michl 2001), which also include design educational aspects (Dunin-Woyseth and Nielsen 2003).

According to various schools within professional studies, the building of a new field of academic knowledge to be derived from a field of practice, should be based on the three main components which together constitute its knowledge base; *history, theory* and *criticism* (se for example various master and doctoral studies in architecture and design in North America). *History* is needed to understand the background and legacy of a field and to define it with regard to other fields of knowledge. *Theory* is built on the ongoing research in dialogue with other fields of knowledge, while *criticism* follows what are regarded as quality standards in practice. However, an important condition for building a new field of inquiry is to secure a critical mass of researchers, who are able to run a qualified discussion both at the ontological and the epistemological level of the field in question. This is why the education of researchers with a doctorate within the field of design education has a high priority in Norway.

2.4. A CRITICAL MASS OF RESEARCHERS

Several university colleges have acknowledged the importance of securing a critical mass of researchers in order to build a field of knowledge in design education. At the AHO programme,

several doctoral degrees by a practitioner in design education have been completed or are in progress. Some of the topics are; the role of spatial representations and visual communication as a key aspect for democratic participation and thus future general education (Nielsen 2000), discussions on how a *formbild* is constructed in teacher training education, with a base in empirical studies and discourse analysis (Gulliksen 2006), and strategies for design learning related to sewing activities (Reitan 2007).

Among the theses in progress some address these important issues further; Karen Brænne studies the philosophies of art and design education in teacher training, Ingvild Digranes discusses conflicting interests when representatives of the 'design world' enter the school arena, Laila Belinda Fauske analyses why and how architecture has been given a position in the national curricula, Morteza Amari studies how Information and Computer Technology (ICT) can be used in both creating images and in distance design education, Eva Lutnæs is investigating the practise of evaluation within the teacher training colleges in Art and Crafts, and finally, Anna Austestad is studying visual culture in relation to the national curriculum.

3. DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPANTS

Aesthetic agendas are recognisable in society today. Corporations within areas as for instance clothing, electronics and food present their consumers with a package and image of a product ideology that might not correspond to the corporate ideology behind the product. Interests within housing and development present their future 'utopian society' hidden within plans unreadable for those outside the inner circle. Plans are presented in 'code', and sometimes hidden away from public scrutiny. The problem is there. It is a goal to educate qualified users, consumers and democratic participants for the future, and create an environment of excellence for further education for professions within design, architecture and visual arts. Education will never exist in a vacuum. It will continuously be constructed in concert with social values and political currents. Its philosophy and ethics must be seen in a societal perspective. This perspective will influence the knowledge content and the discussion on criteria for quality in context. To reach this goal, it encloses a focus upon individuality, style history, techniques, ethics, sustainability, democracy, critical processes, product, studio-work, and, not the least, the ability to evaluate plans, processes and products. It struggles to encompass all areas of design knowledge that a user might need to become an informed, critical future democratic participant.

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