

Seinäjoki Polytechnic

Jurva School of Design

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QUALITY AND NEW CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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DISCOURSIVE POWER: CASE DESIGN IN FINLAND

How to educate young design students at the polytechnic level to become good designers in Finland?

One role of polytechnic education in Finland is to take part in the development of local economic life, trade and industry. In Finland there are three universities and seven polytechnics giving design education. Most of the polytechnic design schools work in the local fields, co-operating with local industry and arts and crafts. Near Seinäjoki – i.e. around Jurva – is the second largest area for the furniture industry in Finland. Within Seinäjoki Polytechnic, the Jurva School of Design takes a leading role in the development of the local furniture industry. One of our aims is to educate young designers to found new design businesses in the area to serve local industry. Our students come from all over Finland to Jurva to study design and thus we are also educating good designers for the whole of Finland.

What do the concepts of good design and good designer means? "Good design" has been inherited from the ideals of the Enlightenment and the times when design promotion was founded in the 1850's. In 150 years these concepts have been defined in many different ways, but perhaps one idea has pervaded these concepts throughout the years: a good designer fulfils the user's aesthetic needs for the objects and products used in people's everyday lives.

What does the concept of Finnish design means then? Finnish design entered the international stage in the 1950's at the Milan Triennales. Before that – between the world wars – architect Alvar Aalto had shown some of the power of Finnish design at the World Exhibitions in Paris and New York, using pure, biomorphic forms and wood as the material of his objects. Later on they were defined as symbols of Finnish design, where nature is not seen as decorative but as "something much deeper: living in close communion with nature..." (Periäinen 1987: 6-11). This is one of the most powerful meanings or significations for Finnish design – still, today, it carries this metaphor within it. It has become a discursive power of Finnish design. (See the pictures of Alvar Aalto's Paimio chair designed in 1932, Pentti Hakala's Lily chair designed in 1985, Simo Heikkiläs's Visa 1 chair designed in 1991 and Ilkka Suppanen's Nomad chair designed in 1994).

Here the concept of discourse is treated as a symbolic signification order for producing objects as good Finnish design. I am referring here to the philosophy of Michel Foucault and his concept of discourse and power. Discourse is a signification system ruling everything out that does not have significance or is non-recognizable within. Discourses circulate among groups of individuals. Individuals are

bound by the doctrines of discourses to a certain type of enunciation, i.e. speaking or acting as in design work. These doctrines lead the speaking subjects into the power of discourse. (Foucault 1996:28-29)

Discourses produce the conditions for Finnish designers to create their products. My research concerns the discourse of good Finnish design: how to speak about design in Finland that it will be recognized as Finnish. In my research I have found that to be a good designer in Finland one has to express attitude and manifest one's theses about the character of Finnish design. The so-called self expression of a designer can become significant in Finland when it is understood to have a relationship with the recognized character of Finnish design. The character of Finnish design becomes a delimiting authority in design discourse in Finland. Actually it is the discourses that perform the design work, not the intentional or self-expressing designers. Every designer in Finland confronts the ethical demand to design products with the character of good Finnish design. Those designers who do not take advantage of this ethical demand do not have the possibility to become significant designers in Finland. (Takala-Schreib 2000).

Is Finnish design good design when it is thought of as fulfilling the user's aesthetic needs? Take for example the Aalto's furniture designs: are they still considered beautiful and usable – and by whom? Those pieces of furniture stand for a corporate identity in Finnish public buildings, placed in their entrance halls to welcome visitors or as a symbol of good Finnish design at furniture fairs. Who buys them for their own home?

Alvar Aalto's furniture is designed in the power of the functionalistic and Bauhausian discourse: they must be light and easy to clean and move in a room (Bauhaus 1983: 103); they must be made by some "new" technical method, as in this case the moulding of plywood (Aalto 1984:75). They were avantgarde design in their times. In our times they have become status symbols of good taste. For designers they stand for an ideal of good form and design. We see them as examples of modern and functionalistic design. Everyone recognizes them in Finland but not everyone buys them for their homes. A democratic ideal of functionalistic design does not serve the innermost aesthetic needs of everyone's living ideals. They are designers' universal illusions of a better everyday life for everyone. It is an illusion of the Enlightenment: the designer should know better what is good for people. This is a recognized ideal in the discourse of good design.

At the moment we have two different designer discourses in Finland: The well-known and recognized discourse of the "star designer", where a good designer in Finland is a national hero. They are aiming for the spotlight: design exhibitions and competitions. One ideal for these designers is a universal form language for the products. These designers are capable of recognizing sensitively every movement in the spotlight of "good design", even though they do it unconsciously. The discourse rules that they work with their intuition and have an illusion of self-expression in their ideas and objects. Their innermost drives and will of life springs from the ambition to be a talented and established designer in the design world.

The lesser known discourse of an anonymous designer who works in co-operation with industry – mainly known among industrial designers as in the information technology business. Design is normally performed as teamwork. The design brief is given by the firm. The designer has to recognize consumer life styles and needs as well as the firm's technical production system etc. The designer is a visualizer of several concepts and finally of the prototype for the product. The designer expresses the distilled vision of the team in a product. The drives of these designers begin from the need to take part in business and in industry and trade.

At the Jurva School of Design we cater for both of these design discourses in our education. It is difficult to live without one or the other. Our students can find their path whether they want to follow the first or the second discourse. We teachers try to support them in their search for the right path for themselves.

In our strategically policy we concentrate more on the second discourse: the anonymous designer who works together with the local furniture industry and has the skills to research consumers' life style and users' everyday living experience to design good and usable products for the market.

But if a young designer wants to become established in the Finnish design world or to be recognized in designer discourse, he or she has to show the capacity to design objects such as furniture with a flair for good Finnish design. They have to learn which words to use when speaking about their design objects in the media. We also offer the best-established designers in Finland to teach them, so that they come into close contact with the design discourse in power.

I shall take one example of the well-known "star design" discourse: two of our students designed a wooden bench for one of the most important international wooden furniture competitions, the Ashikawa in Japan. They took part in some other competitions during their student years as well and have been successful. In Japan they were awarded a silver medal. The discourse that speaks in their words – in a local newspaper – refers quite strictly to Finnish functionalistic design: one aim is to construct furniture with minimal energy and material and with maximum function in use; another aim is to influence the whole design world. Also they are able to tell a story about their object in the Japanese context. (Lehtinen 2002). They have learned their lesson and found out their own path. And I am quite sure that in the future we will hear from the two young men in the Finnish design world – even if they do not take part in the design of everyday products for every man and woman. But we also need the star designer discourse in our education – it is part of our sales promotion and a brand of our design.

In the history of Seinäjoki Polytechnic, the Jurva School of Design is starting its fourth year. During this time we have build our strategic policy in the discourse of the anonymous designer for industry and appreciation of the different types of users of everyday products. We have concentrated on so-called user-inspired or user-centred design. The designer must have a sensibility to enter into the user's emotions and everyday experience. The designer also has to have the skills to

research the everyday experience and tastes of different kinds of users: young, old and middle-aged people; poor, rich and middle-class people. They have to be capable of reading the different cultural meanings that different people give to the same material object. They have to find different kind of needs for the usability of their products: social, emotional, aesthetical, biological and functional needs. Designers who work in this design discourse cannot be content only with the ideals of the design world – which might even be harmful. Every man and woman does not necessarily understand or like the designer's minimalist or universal form language.

In my second example I will present a project that has been carried out together with a local furniture company, Junet Oy. One aim of the project was to design a furniture set for elderly people. We – as teams of students, and also teachers – worked with the project for nearly two years. We started together with other Schools of the Seinäjoki Polytechnic: the Business and the Technical Schools. The students worked in several teams to research multiple aspects of the project: our design students concentrated on the user's context, the usability problems and possibilities.

The design students made sketches of several concepts and tested several prototypes. One of the students concentrated in his Polytechnic theses on the usability of the dining chair. The chair was tested in three phases in the real environment. Users, the elderly people, were asked about their experiences and they were observed by the student during the use of the different prototype chairs. The users were actually part of the design team.

Even though the design process was complex – compared with the intuitional design work – the furniture firm Junet was pleased with the results of the project: the project gave rise to new methods for researching the user's needs and worlds, and the usability of the products. This knowledge can also be useful in marketing: industry can gain a real picture of the defined consumers.

When industry understands the meaning of some new productive way of working, then a local development has begun. This is also one starting point of our research and development services for the local furniture industry. Our Design unit – in future the Habit Centre – will further deepen the user-inspired and -centred approach to research and education. Our challenge is to educate good designers who want to work in the second designer discourse: the anonymous designer who has multiple skills in qualitative research and user-inspired design. But our challenge is also to gain better recognition for a design discourse where we can find an appreciation of different kinds of users and their everyday lives and their needs for products.

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