Presentation

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Students today – tomorrow designers of a sustainable future!

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Students today -
tomorrow Designers of a Sustainable Future!

I represent the university of Linnaeus in Småland, south of Sweden. Our university started in January this year after hard work with fusion between the university of Växjö and the university of Kalmar. Our Institution of design is since then part of the Economy faculty. We will be the future host of Cumulus conference 2013.

Design has developed as an academic discipline since approximately 2000 in Sweden. Today we have reached a point where we- occupied with design education at the university of Linnaeus-more than previously have confronted questions of quality. By quality in this respect we mean designers with an increased ability to reflect and analyse in a new and a more responsible way towards the challenges posed by a society in structural crisis. Traditional design education in Sweden has mostly addressed questions of designing objects of different kinds and did not specifically include theory of a more scientific nature beside the traditional design history courses. The traditional students were mainly taught to respond to questions of how to design, more seldom why they should do it. Corresponding to mainstream design culture, economical aspects were considered first and foremost and designers were considered as more of stylists than responsible artists/designers.

This corresponded mainly with the development of a society based on consumption. The development was not at all without its critics. Early on Victor Papanek observed that “there are professions more harmful than industrial design-but only a few”.

The institutional basis of design education then was considered to prepare designers to satisfy the demands of the producer and the market, that is, to produce a surplus. In Växjö we have tried another approach to the matter of responsibility on behalf of design students. The main reason for this change in curriculum is, as mentioned, taking seriously the question of global and local crisis.

Since the general paradigm shift into what was labelled postmodernism or late modernism (Habermas) attention was increasingly directed to the problems connected to a hard core designing and things slowly began to change. Today there is in Europe a knowledge of the necessity to educate future designers in another way than hitherto, due to the many problem humanity is facing.
So, in Växjö at our university one turning point came when HSV, The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, made an evaluation of Swedish design schools in the year 2000. The number of design courses had started to increase uncontrolled. Design was in some cases just a word to attract students to courses with low or none design approach in terms of applied art. HSV recommended the schools of Design education to sharpen their visions and formulate clearer profiles. They also wanted the educations to develop research programs thereby including theory.

Another important turning point was one year later, 2001, when the Minister of Industry declared that the Swedish government should make a commitment to Design which should support the industry and take a greater part in society and its development, a thatcherite strategy implemented from England. The Swedish government started the “National Programme for Design as a force for development for business and public activities” My translation of “Design som utvecklingskraft för näringsliv och offentlig verksamhet”. The culmination of this effort was the Swedish design year 2003, with a lot of activities in different arenas.

But let’s go back to Linnaeus university. In this period of time the Design program started in Växjö and in Pukeberg. Both educations, although separately, were under the heading of academic studies. After the fusion 2010 we now have two design programmes at bachelor level at the Institution of design. The design program located in Växjö is themed Sustainability, while the program located some miles away, but belonging to the same university is themed Product design. There is also the master level, which is starting this autumn.

I am going to focus on the education in Växjö because this is where I am responsible for the program. The proposal from HSV clarified that we were obliged to demarcate the difference between non-academic design learning and the academic one. Teachers were recruited from HDK in Gothenburg, were a process of redefinition of the subject was already along. Their intention was/is to remove design education from a traditional curriculum a general one with all students studying graphic, spatial and product design within the same program. The model was implemented as well at the Växjö University, as we were called then, under the heading of sustainability and holism.
Next step was to increase the amount of theory in this new kind of design education to (for) fill the wishes from HSV to increase levels of analyzing and prepare students for research as well as for practice and the most important of all to get students with a critical attitude towards design in several aspects as ecological, economical and never the less social aspects. Briefly spoken: a design not for waste…

I will now try to explain to you very briefly how our education is constructed. We have 15-20 students in every class where no definition of future specialization is articulated. Most of them work towards a specialisation during these three years but not all. Some of them feel comfortable in several design disciplines or work somewhere in between.

In our education we work with different themes. The starting point for the first year’s course is relationship between the I and the others. The Second year students create knowledge of material aspects as well as production processes and the design process in arenas with industry and organisations. Last year questions of sustainability are focused from different starting points in terms of economy, ecology and sociality, locality, globality.

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Now I will raise the question of value corresponding to the innovative forms the education has been led into at our university. We started out from the conviction that the designer of the future has to be more connected to theory than before, in order to be able to analyze complicated situations and act in a more cautious and humanistic way when it comes to design decisions.

This being all well, there is the problem of time schedules… So I and my colleagues have recently given attention to what seems to be – within each student – an underdose of both theory and the
traditional design teachings (praxis). So our questions have been formulated as the following: Is there a “Right Balance” between the two fields of study and in that case, where is it demarcated? (What is the right balance between the two fields of study for the future designers?) There have been tendencies that the ability to practicate, to invent, to draw etc has diminished. If so, does it matter and what is to be considered most important: to think or to act? I know your answer – both, so it turns into a question of Balance. So, how do we measure abilities? It goes without saying that our aim is far from wanting them to finish their studies with less ability to handle the traditional design tools, but neither take up the same tools without theoretical knowledge and information.

John Thackara, as we could hear in Cumulus conference in St Etienne some years ago, talks about Design Mindfulness where he believes that ethics and responsibility can inform design decisions without constraining the social and technical innovations. This is our belief as well and in the meantime we hope to get both ends meet harmoniously – the question is to be further discussed.

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