

# Scandinavian Design and New Nordic

Identifying challenges and opportunities related to being part of the strong Nordic design tradition

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## ABSTRACT

Scandinavian Design had its Golden Age in the 50's and 60's. It is described as authentic, functional, democratic and modern, but at the same time a bearer of tradition. Many young designers felt burdened by the strong heritage, but Nordic designers have now taken on the approach "freedom through submission". During the last 10-20 years they have been in the process of rediscovering the Nordic tradition. "New Nordic" design is a reinterpretation of the traditions from Scandinavian Design. There has been a change of focus from production to communication when designing products. New Nordic design portrays a dream picture of Nordic people as careful, responsible consumers, but rising tension, political polarization and the fact that Nordic consumption habits are far from sustainable are threatening this image.

**KEYWORDS:** Scandinavian Design, New Nordic, tradition, heritage, identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "Scandinavian Design" is used for the design from the Nordic countries, excluding Iceland, from 1950 to 1970 (Fallan, 2003). The term has its origin from the traveling exhibition "Design in Scandinavia" that toured the USA and Canada in the period 1954-1957. Geographically Scandinavia consists of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, however, when talking about Scandinavian Design, Finland is usually included.

Skou & Munch describe Scandinavian Design as "authentic as opposed to superficial (honest functionality), it transcends the fluctuations of fashion (enduring aesthetics) and represents a subtle modernization that has preserved traditions and values of craftsmanship, as opposed to a more radical modernist celebration of industrial design" (Skou & Munch, 2016).

Architecture critic Kurt W. Forster believes that design and architecture from the Nordic countries had a peak in the 20's and 30's led by architects like Alvar Aalto, then again a Golden Age in the 50's and 60's at the same time as the welfare system in the Nordic countries was established (Kjeldsen, 2012). Many designers felt burdened by the strong heritage, but now, it is possible to talk about a third peak where designers are in the process of rediscovering the Nordic tradition.

This article will explore how contemporary Nordic designers deal with their strong design heritage. Are they left in the shadows of the great designs from Hans J. Wegner and Arne Jacobsen or can they draw strengths from the golden days of Scandinavian Design? The purpose of the article is to help emerging designers from

the Nordic countries understand the context they are working within and identify potential challenges they are facing related to their identity as Nordic designers. Being aware of traditions and context makes it possible to design products that better resonate with social values. This article will take a historical approach to Scandinavian Design and New Nordic design. The focus will be on design of houseware, furniture and consumer products.

## **2. METHOD**

This article is a literature review of articles about Scandinavian Design and New Nordic design. To complement the articles and to get an understanding of the contemporary designers' point of view, panel discussions and interviews have been used. Both articles providing an objective historical view on design from the Nordic countries and articles with critical reflections have been included in the literature review to identify the context Nordic designers are working within and possible challenges they are facing.

## **3. SCANDINAVIAN DESIGN**

### **3.1 The beginning**

In 1947, furniture and household items from Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland were present at Triennale in Milan (Sommar, 2004). Two years later, Hans J. Wegner's *The Chair* was to see on the front cover of Time Magazine. During the 50's and 60's, Scandinavian Design achieved international fame, but the origin can be traced back to long before the 50's and 60's. In most European countries, the ideals of the ruling class created the foundation for the design of furniture and commodities. In Scandinavia, on the other hand, the customs and traditions from the agrarian society played a crucial role for the development of the practical and simple design that is characteristic of Scandinavian Design. Generations of fishermen and farmers built their own houses and furniture from what materials they had nearby. Wood from the forest, mostly

spruce and pine, was a dominating material, but also stone, leather, metal, linen, wool, sheepskin and fur were used.

### **3.2 Tempered industrialization**

The leading interior design magazine in Denmark, Bo Bedre, believed that Danish design was a result of tempered industrialization combined with craftsmanship and usability (Munch, 2017). The teachings of Kåre Klint during the 20's and 30's carried out the idea that Danish design followed a route to modernity that also preserved tradition. Klint's father, also an architect and designer, Peder Vilhelm Jensen Klint stated "we are searching after the lost thread, and if we find it, we will bind together a new tradition so firmly that even the less educated architects will build with taste, because they will know nothing else" (Munch, 2017). Even though craftsmanship was an important factor for Danish design, the majority of the furniture by Hans J. Wegner, Finn Juhl, Arne Jacobsen and Poul Kjærholm were produced industrially. In the 50's and 60's, new materials and production methods, for example plastic, wood lamination and foam, opened up new possibilities for designers (Fallan, 2003). It became possible to manufacture furniture with organic, natural shapes, which became one of the characteristics of Scandinavian Design.

### **3.3 A middle way**

In the 30's the first steps towards modern welfare states were made in several of the Nordic countries (Sommar, 2004). The idea that good design was a democratic right was put on the political agenda. After the second world war, the Nordic countries represented an harmonious middle ground between the free market capitalism in the US and the strictly regulated Soviet (Skou & Munch, 2016). In Norway, designers from Statens Håndverks- og Kunstindustriskole were trained in a socialist tradition and became part of the great modern project that involved designing products that would benefit the greatest number of people

(Fallan, 2003). Designers focused on creating furniture that were accessible and democratically inclusive, but often the abstract reductions and minimalist aesthetics were too demanding for the common consumer. Scandinavian Design was praised as bearer of moral and democratic values (Munch, 2017). Munch believes this otherness was partly constructed, what he calls a self-exoticization.

### **3.4 The fall of Scandinavian Design**

Scandinavian Design fell out of focus during the postmodern era in the 1970's and 80's with the arrival of pop-culture (Halén, 2003). Norway close to disappeared from the international competition (Fallan, 2007). During the 80's Norway had a rapid technological development due to the emerging oil industry, but the new technology did not benefit the furniture industry. The existence of the manufactured goods industry became inessential for the national economy of Norway. A decrease in the production of the design classics from the 50's and 60's resulted in that many of them got completely forgotten. That was the case with the chair "Condor", designed by Bent Winge in 1959 (Torsteinsen, 2018). The furniture company Eikund had to hunt down a Japanese furniture collector and have him measure and draw the chair, so that they could eventually get it back into production.

### **3.5 In the shadow of Scandinavian Design**

Many Norwegian and Danish designers felt burdened by their tradition and trapped in the shadow of the pioneers from the 50's and 60's. In 1980 a group of Norwegian students arranged a symbolic funeral for Scandinavian Design as a concept because they believed it had become too elitist and narrow-minded (Fallan, 2007). A six-meter long coffin with the words "Scandinavian Design" was transported on the roof of a limousine down Karl Johans Gate, transferred onto a boat and sunken in the Oslo fjord. The president of Norske Industridesignere, Terje Meyer, said in an interview regarding the funeral

that "The term Scandinavian Design is founded on the Nordic craft traditions and can therefore not ensure the role of the industrial designers in today's society". Designer (and coffin constructor) Pål Hansen stated that Scandinavian Design has been a hindrance for industrial designers. He believed that designers should have the industry's needs as focus, and not just make another "cool" household item. The Danish design group Spring did a similar stunt in 1995 (Skou & Munch, 2016). They demolished a Wishbone chair by Hans J. Wegner with a chainsaw. The group criticized the boring timelessness of Danish Design and believed that Scandinavian Design belonged in a museum.

## **4. NEW NORDIC**

Despite the efforts by designers to put Scandinavian Design behind them, the phenomenon got a revival in the 1990's (Kjeldsen, 2012). In Norway, a new market for home goods was emerging. Both new products and re-launched classics from the 50's and 60's were available (Skou & Munch, 2016). The ideas from Scandinavian Design got reinterpreted by a new group of designers. The term "New Nordic" arose in the design world in 2005 together with a new international interest for design from the Nordic countries. It started with the food, the New Nordic diet, a diet consisting of simple, back to the basics, "stone age" meals. After followed design, architecture, fashion and music. The replacement of "Scandinavian" with "Nordic" marks a new era. "Scandinavian" is often associated with the Scandinavian welfare model and political values. "Nordic" can give associations to nature, history, culture and national identity. In New Nordic design, Iceland is included, together with Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland.

### **4.1 Nordic mindset**

Skou and Munch state that "New Nordic" is all about building on our design heritage (Skou & Munch, 2016). They describe it as a rhetorical change from a style to a mindset which is

artistically liberating. By embracing the tradition, designers can liberate themselves from the shadow. Carrying on the tradition, does not mean to return to the old ways, rather it means to use geographically determined qualities in new ways (Kjeldsen, 2012). Design studio Space Copenhagen believes that the reason for why Nordic design has gained momentum around the globe might lie in the motivation behind the design. Nordic design aesthetics are not about the exact expression or form, but about the mindset. Scandinavia is located at the coldest corner of Europe. The people living there have always had challenges to overcome and this has led to a design tradition with focus on product longevity and functionality (Grundtoft, 2016).

#### **4.2 New companies**

In the 2000's, companies like Muuto and Normann Copenhagen took the role as "editors" of design (Skou & Munch, 2016). They motivate designers to work with unfamiliar materials or product categories. Earlier, designers usually worked with one manufacturer specializing in a material or production method. The word "Muuto" is Finnish and means new perspective (Grundtoft, 2016). The company does not want to repeat Danish Modern, but has the vision to deliver a new perspective on Scandinavian Design by expanding the design heritage with new materials, techniques and creative thinking (Munch, 2017). They are giving the designers room to go beyond the Scandinavian Design tradition. Nina Brun from Muuto says "Muuto has a goal of revitalizing the Scandinavian Design heritage by adding a new chapter. This chapter is the New Nordic. We are building on our heritage, but at the same time we are focused on creating a future" (Grundtoft, 2016). The *Cover* chair is a good example of this. The starting point was a typical Scandinavian chair, inspired by design pioneers like Hans J. Wegner, but the thin oak veneer, enabled by modern production methods, adds something new.

#### **4.3 Scandinavian design with a twist**

During the 1990's the modernist statement "form follows function" lost some of its relevance. Instead, experience and sensibility became important factors when designing (Johnsen, 2003). New Nordic designers are giving a humoristic twist to basic shapes and ordinary objects. There has been a change of focus from production to communication. Riddles and storytelling are used to engage the user (Skou & Munch, 2016). Designers do not attempt to create something completely new and spectacular, rather they base their designs on familiar shapes and concepts and add a subtle new twist. Skou and Munch call it "tweaked functionalism". One example is the Unfold Pendant Lamp designed by From Us With Love. The lamp has the shape of an ordinary factory pendant lamp, but it is made out of an unusual material, soft silicon rubber (Muuto, n.d.). Using rubber as a material both adds a humoristic twist and a functional feature. The lamp uses less space under transport because it can be folded and it lessens the risk of people getting hurt from bumping their heads into the lamp.

#### **4.4 Nordic designers today**

Space Copenhagen says that carrying the mantle of the strong Nordic design heritage has been an obstacle for moving forward (Grundtoft, 2016). They believe that many designers have struggled with getting out of the shadows of the design classics from the 50's and 60's, but now things are starting to change. Swedish designer Anya Sebton said in a panel discussion at Stockholm Furniture Fair in 2014 that Scandinavian designers no longer need be restricted by a Scandinavian Design guideline involving the use of soap washed oak and natural colors (Stockholm Design Talks, 2014). The change from a Nordic style, with a specific set of aesthetics, to a Nordic mindset where communication and storytelling is more important has been liberating for Nordic designers. Space Copenhagen says "It now feels like we are coming out of the shadow

and the wheels are turning again.” (Grundtoft, 2016).

Everything Elevated consists of the two Norwegian designers having Brooklyn as a base (Grundtoft, 2016). They state that Norway is a country with a small production of designed goods and that it is challenging for young designers to find clients and companies to cooperate with. One good side effect is that it has created a strong bond between designers. Young designers today do not see each other as rivals, but rather colleagues that can support each other and be part of a strong new design culture.

#### **4.5 Alternative to the consumerist culture**

Fallan argues that the financial crisis in 2008 caused a renewed interest for the Scandinavian welfare model and resulted in a rising demand for Scandinavian Design in the US (Skou & Munch, 2016). Scandinavia is no longer the middle way as during the cold war, but rather “the other way”, an alternative to neoliberal capitalism. New Nordic can be seen as a sharp contrast to the consumerism of today (Hålen, 2003). The challenges related to sustainability has led to a critical view on the relationship between man and nature and an appreciation of the primitiveness and the pre-modern roots of Nordic design (Skou & Munch, 2016). The simplicity, lightness and truth to materials that defines Nordic design can be seen as an alternative to the consumerist culture. New Nordic is part of a new ideal lifestyle where environmental concerns are taken into consideration.

Ingrid Sommar states that “What we (Scandinavians) share (...) is closeness to an unusually wild and beautiful landscape and roots in the Nordic culture with its simple, economical and useful design” (Skou & Munch, 2016). New Nordic can be seen as part of a cultural trend that seeks new closeness to nature. The Norwegian magazine Harvest is publishing articles discussing this topic (Harvest Magazine, n.d.). The magazine

seldom includes statistics and information about new sustainable technology, it rather has articles concerning the society we are living in and the lives we are dreaming of having. Some of the articles describe a dream life where man is connected to nature and uses the resources respectfully.

Norwegian designer Andreas Engesvik stated at Stockholm Furniture Fair “we (Scandinavians) are careful consumers. We buy few, proper things and maintain them. That’s the most important value we are going to export in the next 50 years” (Stockholm Design Talks, 2014). Peter Brundgaard Rützou from Space Copenhagen shares Engesvik’s opinion; “In stead of buying ten, we would rather pay a bit more and buy one, and then have it for a lifetime. Not just for the aspect of resources, but also for the storytelling. If it is made good and looks good, the wear and tear has it’s own story. It is one of these things you pass on in a family”. Nina Bruun states “The Scandinavian tradition is to create products with longevity, both in terms of aesthetics and function. The focus is on quality and details, all the elements of the design has a purpose. This is in our genes as Scandinavian designers and it is giving us a fundament” (Grundtoft, 2016).

#### **4.6 Is the image of the Scandinavian model starting to crack?**

Today, it can seem like the image of the utopian Scandinavian model is starting to crack. The pressure of refugees and immigrants have caused a rising tension and a political polarization in Scandinavia. Rising ethnical and religious diversity in combination with larger economic differences is challenging the social cohesion. The political consequences are already visible with the growing far right parties (Trägårdh, 2012).

When it comes to sustainability, the picture of the Nordic countries as an epitome of sustainable living is starting to lose its credibility as well. The Nordic countries are among the worst when it comes to the ecological footprint per person. Denmark had an ecological footprint per person

of 7.1 global hectares in 2014, which made them the 9th worst among 188 countries (Global Footprint Network, 2014). A global hectare (gha) is a biologically productive hectare with world average biological productivity. The available biocapacity per person is 1.7 gha and the world average consumption was 2.8 gha in 2014. If the whole world had lived like Denmark in 2014, we would have used the resources of 4.24 earths.

Johnsen states that the “retro modernism” of New Nordic “has been turned into a commercial strategy and a tendentious fad for several semi-talented designers, often resulting in a dry, uncritical repetition of a modernist formal language devoid of any kind of novelty” (Johnsen, 2003). Many manufacturing companies use pictures of beautiful Nordic nature on their websites. Some examples are the websites of Norwegian furniture factories Fjordfiesta and Tonning & Stryn (Fjordfiesta, n.d.) (Tonning & Stryn, n.d.). This can create associations to local materials straight from nature, but few companies are using materials sourced in Scandinavia. Furniture company Eikund produces Norwegian design classics in oak. Oak is part of their trademark and they have even included the Norwegian word for oak, “eik”, in their name, still they have to import oak from Slovenia because it is not available in Norway (Klippenberg, 2017). Oak has traditionally been an important material for Norway’s ship building, from the Viking ships to the ships of the 15th century, but this put a big pressure on the forests and large parts of the oak forests were lost (Aamlid, 2017).

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While Norwegian and Danish designers in the 80’s and 90’s tried to achieve freedom by rejecting the traditions of Scandinavian design, New Nordic rather takes on the approach “freedom through submission”. Only by embracing the tradition can designers liberate themselves from the shadow. A change from a style to a mindset gives designers artistic freedom. They do not have to follow aesthetic guidelines to be regarded as part of New Nordic.

New Nordic designers focus on storytelling and communication rather than having a specific aesthetic to follow. It is not a repetition of Scandinavian Design, rather it is a comment to the values from the 50’s and 60’s, often expressed in a humoristic way. The traditions of Scandinavian Design are no longer a burden for new designers, but a source of inspiration.

Scandinavian Design has been criticized for being based on outdated traditions, but today, these traditions from the simple life in the agrarian society and the close connection to nature is exactly what the world is looking for. The world needs this dream picture of a harmonious society. Scandinavian Design was criticized for self-exoticization in the 50’s and 60’s, today we might witness a similar exoticization, but the focus has moved from being the middle way between USA and Soviet to being the other way, an alternative to the fast-paced consumerism. The way people from the Nordic countries consume and the close connection to nature are now the focus.

One of the words that have been used to describe Nordic design is honesty. Nordic design is expected to be authentic as opposed to superficial. This article has identified that there is a conflict between the image of the Nordic countries as role models for a sustainable way of living and the reality of how people consume in the Nordic countries. Nordic designers should be careful with promoting this image when designing. Using this image as a commercial strategy without addressing the challenges the Nordic countries are facing can threaten the honesty. However, this dream picture of a sustainable way might be needed both in the Nordic countries and the rest of the world to motivate change among people’s consumption habits. Nordic designers look back to a time where people lived modest lives in harmony with nature. This is a good place to draw inspiration from, but it is important that designers are aware that the Nordic way of living is not perfect.

The majority of literature reviewed in this article is celebrating Scandinavian Design and New Nordic. There is little literature available that takes a critical view on New Nordic. How Nordic designers can deal with the image of sustainable consumption that is associated with New Nordic remain unsolved. This is worth discussing so that new Nordic designers can get a better understanding of the challenges they are facing and how to tackle them.

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