

ARTEFACTS AS STORYTELLERS OF NEW NORDIC DESIGN THINKING

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the different roles physical objects can take based on how they are presented and used in a design process. It argues how the same object can take different roles as means for collaborative sense-making or to communicate a defined story by a designer. The context in which these objects are placed, and the theme which the designer bases the objects on, determines the kind of stories that it will support. The paper draws upon two different design projects with vastly different approaches, to show how the roles of the objects contributed differently in the sense-making and understanding the notion of New Nordic Design Thinking.

INTRODUCTION

The two projects were conducted through a New Nordic Design Thinking talent programme, in an attempt to understand what the notion means in different design contexts. Common for the projects was that results were presented through different tangible objects. These objects varied physically but also in the way they were employed. The objects created for the two projects had two different purposes; one was used to convey a fixed story that we wanted to tell, the other as a flexible invitation that encouraged stories that the participants wanted to tell. Both were made to widen our understanding of what New Nordic Design Thinking could mean. Within existing research the term “constructive design research” has been widely discussed. Koskinen et al (2011) explain how design of “a product, system, space or media”, can be core in constructing knowledge. They define constructivists as

people who claim that knowledge is constructed rather than organized around purposes. This supports what I try to convey with the two cases, as I present how the making of the objects was constructions of our own understandings of the theme. Similarly, by engaging people, we were trying to construct knowledge by using our objects as key sources in supporting the emerging meanings. Van Dijk (2013) argues that dealing with imaginative complexity we need some structured means to express it in forms that is communicable to others – which I believe was the main motivation for us as designers, while only later realizing how these objects became sources to construct new insights on our theme. By focusing on meanings in the construction of and interactions with the objects instead of seeing the objects as means that *carry* meaning - we create opportunities for meaning to arise (Hummels & Lévy, 2013). As Donald Schön (1983) also puts it, we can respond to surprises by reflecting on our actions, when we enter an experience without any pre-judgements. So through the act of making, we reflect on what is being created, and from this, knowledge is constructed. At the same time, this will test the limits of the conceptions that we have as designers in making the object (Suchman, 2007). This is clearly reflected in the two cases of this paper, as the objects became means to not only create meanings, but also to challenge pre-conceptions.

The first project was completed for the Danish lamp manufacturer Louis Poulsen. This company takes a rather traditional design approach, in which independent industrial designers are solicited to design new lamp concepts, mostly with very little user participation. For this project my team delivered a prototype of a lamp to communicate a particular concept to the company. It embodied our understanding of what New Nordic Design means in the shaping of a future lamp for young people. This was an unfamiliar approach to a human-centred designer like me – to design in the unknown. As Hummels & Lévy (2013) states it “*making enables designers to explore the unknown by trusting their senses, exploring expressivity, and tapping into their intuition.*”. User Centred Design with strong user involvement has been critiqued to only provide



Figure 1 The functions and the aesthetics of the lamp were carefully chosen by the designers to support the story that they wished to convey.

incremental improvements, while putting up restrictions for exploring the full design potential (Jung & Stolterman, 2012). Approaching the design with *designing* allowed us the benefit of exploring our own creativity and ability to make sense of the theme, and then have it challenged when confronted by people afterwards. The same prototype was used in another setting during the Design Week Kolding event. It was used to invite participants to discuss what New Nordic interaction design could mean, through the characteristics of the designed lamp.

The second project was completed in cooperation with Kolding Municipality with the objective of redesigning a local pedestrian street. Our focus was on designing the “Sensing Experience” of the street. We proposed ideas through materials that aimed at involving the local community in envisioning the future of the street. As designers we used our competence to facilitate a setting that encouraged imagination. As Zimmerman et al (2007) argues, designers explore materials and actively participate in intentionally constructing the future, in the form of disciplined imagination, instead of limiting research to the past and present. We wanted to invite people to discuss how a New Nordic pedestrian street could be shaped in the future. The design approach was, unlike the first project, strongly anchored in participatory design with the intention to involve the community. Through the comparison of these two project cases, I will now discuss the use of objects in the design process, and how it supported us differently in widening our understanding of New Nordic Design Thinking.

DESIGNER’S VS PARTICIPANT’S STORY

The first project for Louis Poulsen, had the objective of designing a “Young Lamp” targeting the younger generation. The company is challenged to integrate digitalisation in their designs, while staying true to their legacy. For this, we (in accordance with the company’s artistic design approach) conducted no user research, but designed a digital lamp based on our own understanding of the relationship between youngsters’ use of light and the company’s Nordic design traditions.

The prototype embodied different ideas of a New Nordic “Young Lamp”, such as “mobile”, “social” and “productive”. It was used in two relatively different ways.

The first was in a presentation to the company through a use scenario video. The other was in a workshop at a Design Week where participants were invited to explore the functionalities and aesthetics of the lamp in relation to the theme “New Nordic Design Thinking”. The first communicated a fixed story articulated by us, while the latter invited people to make sense through their own stories and associations.



Figure 2 The designers presenting the concept of the lamp

In the first situation the lamp was put in a very specific context through the video, giving the lamp a specific purpose. Through the storyline of the video, we wanted the audience to envision themselves in a similar situation and accept it for what it was. By placing the object of design in a context, we were able to underline the story of the object that we wanted to convey. This became clear in the presentation at the company, as the audience purely related to the story told. The questions that were provoked through this, were attempting to clarify the gaps in the story by asking questions like “What if I...” “How can I know that...” “What happens when...” The audience would either accept, reject or build further on it. Capturing the object in a static story did not encourage people to make up their own stories.

When the same lamp was exhibited at the Design Week, it suddenly took an entirely new role. We asked participants in the workshop to actively compare our lamp’s characteristics to those of a hi-tech lamp, and

then discuss what might characterise New Nordic interaction design. The comments that the guests had were vastly different from those at the company presentation. It was no longer a question of whether they accepted or rejected the story, as our story was no longer explicitly visible. Rather, the object helped form personal opinions for every participant. Personal stories related to the individual, cultures and associations were discussed. It was no longer just about a lamp, but it was about what the lamp represented in different aspects of people's lives and experiences. As put by Jung & Stolterman (2012) "*materiality can provide useful perspectives to investigate aesthetic and experiential qualities of digital artifacts*" – the materiality of the object gave rise to a better understanding of what the aesthetics and the experience of the object meant, seen from diverse perspectives. This was especially important for our project, as we were investigating the meaning of something as culturally specific as Nordic Design. International participants helped the notion with statements like "*But in Spain it is...*" By not pushing our own story explicitly, we allowed the participants to generate their own. This, for instance, led to rethinking what colours of the light could mean, how different people think of their workspace, and how they fundamentally use light. As one of the participants commented "*(...) but why is the light purple? That is not very Nordic. It should rather be blue*" Instead of being told what the experience should look like, they actively constructed meaningful experiences around the technology and the object given (Sengers et al 2004).

PARTICIPANTS CREATE STORIES BY CONNECTING OBJECTS

For the second project the design teams collaborated with the municipality to reinvent a pedestrian street. We inhabited an abandoned store for three days on the street and designed a range of proposals for urban reconceptualization. This time, we made observational studies and involved the local community in workshops to gather insights to inform the reinvention of the street. We re-created the setting of the street in scale in the abandoned store with materials that represented both existing, and imagined parts of the street. The intention was to engage people actively in discussing the "Sensual Experience" of the street, with a focus on how we could scaffold relations between shoppers, shopkeepers and residents in the street.

This tangible setting invited people to actively envision themselves in a real-life situation. The objects now played a third role for the designers. It was the connections that were made *between the objects* by people that created the stories. For instance, we used objects to bring the presence of the nearby train to the fore, to discuss what role the train might have. Indeed, we did have a vision ourselves about creating relations between people at the street as a New Nordic



Figure 3 Participants enacting stories through the objects

perspective. However, the low fidelity of the objects, invited people to be critical. They were not shy of telling us that one of our ideas had "*been done before*".

The mock up was there to enable people to place new objects, people, scenarios and visions into it. We wanted the objects, which represented different sections of the street, to support the Participants' stories. In comparison to the first case, the mock up was not there to enable evaluation as the lamp prototype did. When the physicality of the street was brought into a different context, it allowed people to think "potential changes". They were actively engaged in an artificial setting that would accept criticism. Using objects in this way supported people in sharing experiences they either had on the street or could envision having. For instance, one of the participants started walking on the objects that were placed on the floor stating "*[...]so if I move like this, and another person is walking towards me in the opposite direction [encouraging another to walk oppositely of him], the water could indicate our meeting by rising [pointing at the blue object in the middle]*"

NAVIGATING OBJECTS TO EXPLORE STORIES

Based on these two projects, this paper seeks to discuss how we can navigate the use of objects in the design process, to gain insights within specific themes of interest. The designed object is rarely able to stand alone and can have vastly different roles in a design process. It can be used as a tool for sense-making, in the words of Sanders and Stappers (2014) "*(...) vehicles for observation, reflection, interpretation, discussion and expression*" – if the designer is willing to give up the power to allow the design to be interpreted and changed. However, the same object may be a strong statement or a story of a designer, when used as means to communicate visions in a specific context.

As our overall aim was to investigate what New Nordic Design Thinking may mean, we could use the objects' different dimensions to either communicate our understanding or invite others to contribute to it. The

chosen materials, functionalities and aesthetics each held potential to trigger associations for both us as designers and the participants. Henare et al (2007) in their book “Thinking through Things” are critical to claims of meaning being detached from the object itself, and argue that meaning and object are the same. *“On this model, meanings attach to things, impose themselves on things (...) or embodied in certain things, but are always presumed to be – in the first instance – distinct from the things themselves”* I find this argument intriguing, as the objects in our cases brought meaning and triggered the stories to the contexts we brought them in.

In the pedestrian street project, we designed the objects in an abstract manner, albeit with a clear internal understanding of how our design was New Nordic. We wanted the objects to encourage relations between people, as we understood this as reflecting the New Nordic notion. When the participants engaged with the objects, we considered it from the perspective of how people expressed the notion of “relations” when engaging with the objects. Through this we learned that “relations” in the street were strongly coupled to the feeling of safety on the street: Two participants discussed how having the object illuminate you and the person walking towards you, could create a sense of safety, when walking the street during the night.

From the projects, it can be said that the way the objects are used will determine the role of the designer either as sense-maker or facilitator of sense-making. When the “Young Lamp” was presented at Louis Poulsen, I noticed how people simply took our New Nordic Design perspective of what a “Young Lamp” is. This becomes evident when comparing it to the other two cases where we opened up the role of sense-making. Looking at the table Figure 4, our story as designers is presented in contrast to the story the participants expressed in relation to our understanding of New Nordic Design Thinking. We look at objects as sources, through which we construct meaning, and move away from considering objects just as means to facilitate certain behaviour. Through this awareness, it enables us to learn about our own understandings of the theme we are designing for. At the same time it gives us the precondition to better understand the stories that the object invites from others. However, there are different risks in using objects in these ways. The first, where the object is used to communicate the designer’s story, risks giving misguided insights of the object. As soon as it is no longer seen in the context that the designer put it in, people can perceive it differently. The story that the designer is trying to convey cannot exist through the object alone. The second way of using the object risks that the stories people tell cannot be retained and might be lost shortly after. These stories are fragmented, and made up of very different and individual experiences which people associate with the object.

	The designers’ story	The participants’ story	Learnings about New Nordic Design Thinking
Louis Poulsen: New Nordic Lamp	A “New Nordic Lamp” that is targeting the younger generation. The light is used as a mobile “social” and “productive” means.	Audience accepts the story as told by the designers. They ask of the designers to fill out the gaps of the story. They want to know “What happens when (...)” “What if I (...)”	The notion is not just about the natural and simplistic aesthetics, but about the natural/simplistic interaction in relation to specific contexts. It is about the experience the object can help in fulfilling.
Design week: New Nordic Design	If we are to explore and design what is New Nordic about light, what would that be?	The participants challenge our representation of what a New Nordic Lamp looks like. Statements like: “...but where I come from we don’t use dimmed lights” The perception of light relates to where people come from and what experiences they have had with light. It is not only about light, but it is about lifestyles.	It can be seen as being able to design in a way that seems natural and simplistic in relation to the lifestyle, culture or practice of people, regardless of whether it can be classified as Nordic or not.
Pedestrian street: New Nordic Re-design of Søndergade	The pedestrian street needs to be reconceptualised. There is a disturbing train nearby, rain water floating the street and no people. We want to use lights and water to enhance the street while connecting the train to rest of the street. How can we make it interactive?	Participants state that, using light “has been done before”. They discuss alternatives to light that would still make people connect by the way they pass by the street. “What if we were walking in opposite directions (*like this*), what would then happen?” “The train could be turned into a nice experience instead of a disturbing one.”	It is about what designed objects can offer to the social experience between people. It is far less about the designed objects, but what they should offer to a social context.

Figure 4 Comparing the cases

For the project regarding the pedestrian street, the role of sense-making lay no longer with the designer nor with the participants, but in the conversation that was stimulated between them. This made it far more difficult to manage the stories as a design statement, as they were no longer singular but kept evolving through discussions.

Considering how the lamp was used, our understanding of what New Nordic Design Thinking means became different in the two experiments. Using it at the presentation at the company, we came to learn how New Nordic Design Thinking is far more than simplistic and natural aesthetics, but is about the simplistic and natural interactions that you have with an object. The discussion that was instigated there, was pointed towards the “how” and “why” of the form and function of the lamp. It was how the lamp offered interactions

that seemed natural in relation to the context we put it in (being the personal workspace). Considering the second experiment at the design week, we came to understand how the notion of New Nordic Design Thinking come to appear culturally specific. When we discuss something like light, we learned how our conception of Nordic light as being dimmed and soft, was very relational to the lifestyles of people and where they came from. So I came to understand that New Nordic Design Thinking is not necessarily about a specific aesthetic or interaction, but could rather be seen as something relational to each individual and the context they engage in. To clarify, using the objects in this manner, informed me how New Nordic Design Thinking, can be seen as being able to design in a way that seems natural and simplistic in relation to the lifestyle, culture or practice of people, regardless of whether it can be classified as Nordic or not.

Looking at the urban design case, I came to understand how New Nordic Design Thinking is not only about physical objects, but about how we design objects to facilitate certain kinds of relations between people. It is about what designed objects can offer to the social experience between people, as our discussion became far less about the designed objects, but what they should offer to a social context. Words like “safety” became central in this discussion.

Depending on where designers are in the design process, it should be with an awareness of whether they are still in the sense-making or whether they are ready to reveal the constructed story in the object. As stated by Jenkins et al (2017) “*Design things enact multiple roles in the context of the process of design; they are messy, and support many different values and viewpoints*”, these object could have multiple roles in the design process, depending on who you are involving and at what stage.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a comparison of roles, which objects can take through two projects in a New Nordic Design Thinking Talent programme. Through these cases, the paper argues how objects can be used to tell different stories within a specific theme. They can be used to communicate constructed stories or encourage construction of new stories through the way designers engage people with the object. Here, the context in which the object is put, has an explicit role in what stories the object will support.

We experimented with how designed objects can be used in our process of getting a closer understanding of what New Nordic Design Thinking means. We came to learn how New Nordic Design Thinking, obviously having its origin in Nordic countries, is not necessarily related to specific Nordic traditions any more. What previously might have been understood as being natural

and simplistic Nordic Design, we came to understand as something that is relational to what people do, what their agendas are and where they come from, regardless of culture. We came to understand New Nordic Design Thinking as a way of designing simplistic and natural in relation to any experience that the designed objects support.

Further, by aligning people with the object, designers are able to move and challenge their visions, as stated by Ehn (2008) “(...)aligning humans and nonhuman resources into to move the object of design forward, to support the emergence, translation, and performance” of the design object through “participation, intervention, and performance in [a] sociotechnical thing”. Elaborating on this statement, we are able to move our designs and our understandings of them, by having people participate in a way that we can support the emergence of what the object means. Through the two presented cases, I would like to emphasize the importance of being able to navigate the roles of objects in a design process to support the stories it can generate. Further, this needs to be done with the perspective on objects as tools for knowledge-creation, rather than “containers” of information and concepts.

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