

Past and Future: Nordic Design History Reassessed

Keynote speaker abstracts

Dr Sarah A. Lichtman, Pratt Institute, New York

**Thinking through Nordic Design: Reflections, Themes, and Pedagogical Practices
in the United States**

Using the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Nordic Forum for Design History as a catalyst, this talk reflects on the ways we have taught, learned, and thought about Nordic design in the United States during the last four decades. It considers past and current practices in exhibition-making and pedagogy and contemplates future disciplinary pathways and possibilities. It explores the mediation and dissemination of Nordic design in the United States by analyzing such design history textbooks as *History of Design: Decorative Arts and Material Culture, 1400-2000* (2013), edited by Pat Kirkham and Susan Soros; *World History of Design* (2017), by Victor Margolin, and *History of Modern Design* (2023), by David Raizman; and contextualizes them alongside historical and contemporary exhibitions.

Taking as its starting point the 1982 landmark exhibition *Scandinavian Design Modern, 1880-1980*, held at New York's Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum—the first major study of design from the region in the United States—the talk charts changes and continuities over time. Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Bard Graduate Center, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are also considered within cultural and academic contexts, as are shifting ideologies and methods that either perpetuate existing U.S. disciplinary models or create new ones. Of note is the recent 2022 exhibition held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890-1980*. The exhibition stands as an exploration of the extensive design exchanges between the United States and the Nordic countries, and its application can serve as a model for future research.

Prof. Penny Sparke, Kingston University, London

Revisiting 'Scandinavian Design'

The myth of 'Scandinavian Design' has existed for well over half a century. Arguably it has had two main incarnations, the first of which came to the fore in the 1950s and 1960s, when, mainly for economic and cultural purposes, it was claimed that Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and, to a certain extent, Norway, shared a design aesthetic/ideology. The second incarnation emerged in the mid-1990s, taking the form of a popular, home-based, style-led global revival of the former which reinforced its mythical nature.

This paper will address the concept of 'Scandinavian Design' from a design historian's perspective. It will briefly trace the forces that underpinned the initial formation of the concept and show how, as they have done in the construction of several nation-focused accounts of modern design, by constructing stories that focused on the 'top-down' roles of organisations, exhibitions, key companies, and heroic designers, historians were complicit in that process.

However, Design History in general has evolved, and, over the last few decades, it has considered the roles of consumption, use, taste, the importance of gender, sexuality, and other markers of identity and, most recently, colonisation, in the meanings of design. In his 2012 book, Kjetil Fallan importantly pointed out that there are many alternative histories of design in, what we still call, 'Scandinavian' countries still to be told.

Given that I have worked as a design historian for several decades I will present a brief analysis of some of my own accounts of design phenomena in the countries under consideration, showing how I initially contributed to the myth but, more recently, began to think about aspects of 'Scandinavian Design' from different perspectives. Regarding the future, hopefully historians will continue to both research and challenge the numerous myths that continue to exist and present a more rounded and insightful picture of the multifarious manifestations of design in the Nordic countries in general.

Prof. Kjetil Fallan, University of Oslo

Past and Future: The Nordic Forum for Design History's 40th Anniversary Conference 26-27 October

2023 at the National Museum, Oslo

Keynote lecture

...dust to dust: material ecologies and the future of design history

Kjetil Fallan, University of Oslo

Abstract

In 1974, looking back at a long, successful career as an industrial designer and design director of US furniture manufacturer Herman Miller, George Nelson remarked that designers had better learn to act more as gardeners than as miners. The modern design profession is often considered a product of the industrial revolution's division of labor, which separated the ideation of artefacts from their execution. As part of the same legacy, where industrial manufacturing as a system was premised on the exploitation of extractive materials and fossil fuels, designers are natural born miners. Designing entails crucial decisions on which and how much materials to mine, blast, drill, excavate, or fell. This under-appreciated aspect of the design process is ripe for historical investigation—especially if we are ever to heed Nelson's call from half a century ago. Given the scale to which the manufacturing industry has grown in order to satisfy our seemingly endless needs and desires, designing as an activity and a profession has decisive impact on ecological systems both locally and globally. This paper will therefore argue for an expanded view of the subject matter as well as the methods of design history, as designing *with*, designing *without*, and designing *out* extractive materials are crucial parameters in both the history and the future of the human-built world. Material ecologies are starting to preoccupy historians of design, and, increasingly, these accounts are also focusing specifically on the environmental performance and impact of materials. Despite these initial forays, materials in their raw commodity forms remains at the margins of design culture, largely invisible, subsumed into the making of consumer goods. One potential strategy to close this gap is to consider raw materials, not as static, given entities, but as manufactured goods in their own right. Doing so will expand the remit of design history's methodological apparatus, and redefine its subject matter to encompass the entire material ecology of design, from the mine to the landfill. The resulting accounts of the waste and want of materials are of great value in forging histories of design that improve our understanding of how design practice and design culture shapes the use of resources and thus how this can be reshaped for a more sustainable future.