

# Scandinavian Design--from arts and crafts to IKEA Lessons and Problems for System Designers A Slide Show

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## Abstract

The presentation will consist of a series of slides showing examples from furniture design, house plans, land use, and interior design. Examples from Scandinavian design are not shown as paradigm cases but rather as examples of the way other designers have faced a series of economic, social, aesthetic and ethical issues. Several key issues will be traced through the photographic examples setting the stage for discussion about issues which confront computer system developers today. The key issues addressed include: 1) while architectural and interior designers have often explicitly addressed social issues they have done so as the *gate keepers of design*, rather than as participants in the design process, how can participation enhance the design environment for computer system users; 2) the movement to mass produced, less costly environmental design has often resulted in reduced choice for consumers, can this problem be avoided in participatory design of computer systems, and 3) the movement to off-the-shelf system components versus custom designed systems, parallels similar developments in architectural and interior design, how can this movement be made more participatory and less restricting.

## Keywords

design, environment, crafts, social values, organizational goals, participation.

## Presentation format

The slide show is designed as an interactive experience offering examples of lessons and problems from four design areas. In each of these areas the economic, and social choices have been clearly specified to the designers, resulting in designs which increased the possibility of flexible arrangements, but did so within narrow definitions of socially 'acceptable' family life patterns. The slides provoke images that may help us draw parallels to the way that system design has traditionally been done within organizationally defined social, economic and aesthetic standards. Photographs from the four areas include:

- 1). *turn of the century furniture design*: the making of mass produced but artistically designed furniture to meet socially defined needs for smaller rooms and less expensive furnishings.
- 2). *post World War II housing plans*: the production of smaller houses with more open interior space for the presumed nuclear family.
- 3). *land use patterns*: putting more people into less area reflecting patterns of socially acceptable mobility.
- 4). *the IKEA concept*: lower priced, pre-packaged interior furnishings to be assembled and arranged by the consumer.

## Overview of Presentation

The following offers a brief overview of developments in interior design at the turn of the last century and the movement to pre-packaged interiors today. Both are compared and contrasted with developments in computer system development and focus on the three issues raised in the Abstract.

## Gate keepers of design

At the turn of the twentieth century, furniture and other design crafts were confronted with the challenge of mechanization. In the industrial design world two contrasting schools dominated the scene--those that saw the ethics and aesthetics of craft as threatened by mechanization, and those that argued for a joining of craft based design with industrial mass production. In Sweden, for example, the Swedish Society of Industrial Design took the latter course creating an environment where both social and aesthetic goals could be integrated into design. In the 1920's and '30's, the furniture industry offered a number of competitions where furniture designers were asked to present prototypes for smaller, less expensive, apartment interiors. The winning designs from artisans were then selected for mass production by the larger furniture manufacturers. Thus a switch in design focus was brought about from custom designed furniture for a few wealthy clients to aesthetic interiors for the newly emerging urban working and middle classes. The paradigm shift, while reflecting social and economic movements, was nevertheless brought about by specifications set by the industry acting as gate keepers of design.

What lessons can be drawn from this period as we confront both the mass production and mass use of information applications in the remaining years of the century? And in particular, what role can participatory design play in revisiting these issues to address more clearly the possibilities for system designers and information users to bend and shape mass artifacts to work practices and social needs? Can we as system developers acting as participatory facilitators encourage more socially useful designs than the gate keepers of the past? Like all historical analysis the analogy to interior design does not offer a straightforward path, but rather a series of options which designers and those that use the artifacts can reflect on. While some system developers might like to think of themselves as artisans crafting fine tools for workplaces, the fact remains that system development is a production process resulting, for the most part, in tools that reflect the social, economic and aesthetic values of others.

The lessons and problems that we can draw from this period are far reaching, beginning with the fact that unlike home furniture design, computer artifacts drastically affect millions of workers around the world with mass produced and designed pieces that often take little notice of worker needs in the rush to fit organizational goals. In a sense, regardless of the level of participation that we introduce in the end-user workplace, we need to keep in mind the fact that the organizations that employ computer applications continue as the gate keepers of overall design. Yet participation in the immediate design environment could open the possibility for work-oriented applications that more closely reflect the social choices of the people who use the applications in their daily work. And like the early competitions for working class furniture design, a call can be made to the computer industry, in general, and to user organizations, in particular, to expand their horizons concerning explicit social choice.

## The IKEA concept--the freedom to arrange one's own desktop ?

As we come to the closing part of this century we can take a look at the Swedish home furnishings marketer, IKEA, as an example not only of mass production of design but

also as mass marketing of design. The IKEA concept illustrates the way that supermarkets and fast food franchisers have spread the idea that consumers should take care of themselves. In IKEA warehouses consumers are offered everything from kitchen components through lighting systems at relatively low cost and socially acknowledged, aesthetically pleasing contemporary design. Marketing costs are cut because there are few salespersons to assist shoppers and consumers are expected to carry away their purchases and assemble them at home. A similar trend can be seen in computer stores where supermarkets of hardware and software have sprung up.

The IKEA analogy suggests that off-the-shelf hard and software, like off-the-shelf furniture, opens new possibilities for low cost and mass use. Users, like home furnishing consumers can carry away their purchases and assemble and integrate them into their home and/or workplace. There is little need for expert advice and more people have access to a range of 'do it yourself' desktop arrangements.

Yet the mass-marketing concept may in fact limit choices, for in both home furnishings and in computer components the supermarkets offer fewer brands, varieties and choices. Computer supermarket choices, like standard living room sets, may end up offering the user/consumer little more than a choice of how to arrange the room or desktop. Additionally, it is extremely intimidating for novices to enter one of these emporiums without some knowledge about how all the things fit together.

In the mass marketing of home furnishings designers have taken a back seat behind the firms that drive the marketing strategies. Is a similar thing happening with computer system developers as more and more individuals and company users go off to computer supermarkets? On the one hand the movement toward low cost and widely available computer components offers the chance for increasing democratic choices. Indeed the system developer, as gate keeper, is almost removed from the process. Yet on the other hand, computer supermarkets sell only the most widely known 'brands' of hardware and software; choices that reflect market mechanisms more than any conscious social process.

Participatory design of computer applications, offers a broader and I believe more democratic strategy, yet we need to be careful to avoid the trap of participation resulting in a narrow range of choices where users only get to select things like icons and menus. In using the analogy of home furnishings, it appears that computer system designers need to not only tackle participation on the workplace level, but also in the marketing arena. I also suggest that for system designers to avoid the pitfalls of other design professions, we need to jump into the process as facilitators of change. Facilitators, who help participants before, during and after purchasing, in doing more than arranging their artifacts. Full participation should, I believe, directly address the issues of social, economic and aesthetic values in the design and use process. It also means intervening to challenge the socially accepted norms. Otherwise, like the architectural and interior designers before us, we are stuck producing a narrow range of products that suit already defined socially acceptable standards. And, like the craftspeople who came before us, we are in danger of finding ourselves with fewer and fewer jobs.