CRITICAL DESIGN FOR DISCUSSION ABOUT PUBLIC SPACE

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ABSTRACT
This research focuses on Critical Design and the use of provocative design objects to create discussion about public space. The project sets out to develop a design approach and a critical design method for making conceptual design proposals and objects that encourage meaningful reflection on design and public space. The outcome is the development of a method and a set of tools to understand and try to create a language of critical design. The results have some common features and thematic categories that will be developed further in the project for the use of design as tools for various critiques in public space. By visualizing possible futures in public space and redefining the functions and conventions, the further research and findings will discuss how critical design can be structured and how it can contribute to design for public space. The intention of the research conducted and the following project was to design a collection of several conceptual design proposals that shift focus from design and object, to the idea and concept, challenging ideas, traditions and the users. The experiments were not for the object to be a set of practical proposals, but to open for conversations among the collaborators and viewers about the value that they might embody. The imaginative encounters staged by the object reflect the mission to provoke a dialogue about the role of objects and the state of design of this time.

Keywords: Critical design, critical artefact methodology, estrangement, poetics, play, public space, product design.

1   INTRODUCTION: ETHICS, OR AESTHETICS?
´In an age of mass production where everything must be planned and designed, design has become a powerful tool which with man shapes his environments, demanding a high social and moral responsibility from the designer.´ [1]
Design studios have grown into client-targeted companies and are fully integrated in the industrial system. Some young and independent designers are questioning the developments in our society and their own motives to produce work. They are interested in looking into the ideas and concepts behind the design and to see how things can have meaning beyond just being stylistic idioms. They have encountered a problem that design has been too focused on being prepared for a production system and focused on stereotype users and that it has taken little account of human relationships, immaterial values, dreams and emotional needs.
The boundaries between creative fields are disappearing and the purpose of design is constantly changing. Many designers are distancing themselves from simply creating beautiful objects aimed for mass-production. They are engaged with creating a more personalized language which enable them to create more participative critical frameworks. Design does not only have to be about solving problems, and not necessary a way of promoting and creating objects. It can also be about finding problems [2, 3]. Instead of serving the industry, it can serve society. Instead of making people buy, it can make people think.

1.1 Critical Design
This article presents an introduction to a critical design method, presenting historical and contemporary perspectives within critical design, and the use of critical design for discussion about public space. In the recent years a movement has developed that focuses on design as a medium for critique [2]. Critique of design has been almost non-existent in Norway and in the Norwegian media. A debate article in Norway's largest newspaper ´Aftenposten´ earlier this year, called *En bedre*

Designkritikk [4] questions why the good academic design foundation lacks of design criticism, while there are good standards for criticism within fields such as art, music and literature. The criticism in the article focuses mainly on and is based on the problems outside design itself and on the market based organization. The following research takes a different stance and addresses the design professions own challenges and limits by reconsidering the principles behind design, and within design philosophy itself. The term Critical Design was first used in Anthony Dunn's´ book Hertzian Tales [3] and later in Design Noir [5]. Dunne and Raby provided this summary of critical design in an interview about their *Designing Critical Design* exhibition [6, 7]:

> What is Critical design? Critical Design uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life. It is more of an attitude than anything else, a position rather than a method. There are many people doing this who have never heard of the term critical design and who have their own way of describing what they do. Naming it Critical Design is simply a useful way of making this activity more visible and subject to discussion and debate.

> What is it for? Mainly to make us think. But also raising awareness, exposing assumptions, provoking actions, sparkling debate, even entertaining in an intellectual sort of way, like literature or film. [6]

Critical design, popularized by Dunne and Raby, uses design artefacts as an embodied critique or commentary on consumer culture. Both the designed artefact (and the subsequent use) and the process of designing such an artefact causes reflections on existing values, mores and practices in a culture. With the influence of e.g. the Dutch design company and the movement Droog Design [8], which was established in 1993, there are areas of design that work more on an art level. Objects created to address issues, explore ideas and express thoughts that have little to do with commercial applications. This critical and questioning aspect of what has come to be called critical design, is appropriated from what is a more an artistic approach. It welcomes pauses and stops within the flood of visual consumption and asks interesting questions about the relationship between a particular type of design and art [8].

Since the 1920s it was believed that the Bauhaus formula of ´form follows function´ required a minimalistic language of form suited to the industrial age. At the end of the 20th century, the slogan for many designers changed into ´form follows concept´. Design as critique builds on attitudes of Italian Radical Design of the 1970s who were critical of social values and design ideologies [6]. Dunne describes critical design as being related to critical theories quoting this passage from Raymond Guess: ´Critical theories aim at emancipation and enlightenment, at making agents aware of hidden coercion and putting them in a position to determine where their true interest lie.´ [9]

2 METHOD

2.1 Critical Artefact Methodology

The main method intended to use for this study is a critical artifact methodology by Simon John Bowen [10]. Through research into and practical experience of this method, the aim is to utilize similar techniques and tactics to develop a critical design method suitable for other contexts, such as product design education at tertiary level or higher and also for urban planning. The intention is to present this method and its underlying methodology and practical exercises in a workshop with stakeholders related to the project. These workshops are to generate discussion on how designers and stakeholders might employ similar tactics to their own practice, and how to generate debate about the use of critical design for public space. The intended result of the findings of the research and study was to develop a series of tools and models that will enable me to develop a critical design methodology.

2.2 Case study: Kongsvinger Town Sqare.

The suggested development for applying the critical artefact methodology consisted of several stages. The intention of following case study [11] is to use the critical artefact methodology [10] to gain insight to the applications of its principles for design practice and to see how it might be deployed in a collaborative urban planning project with Kongsvinger municipality and stakeholders related to the development of the town square. Kongsvinger is a town and a municipality in Hedmark County, Norway. The collaborative partners and resource persons were a cross disciplinary team consisting of approximately ten people, who all were working on the development of the local town hall square. The

team consisted of city-planners, landscape architects, a traffic team leader and an advisor for managing projects between public administration and social entrepreneurs. Kongsvinger has a town square located in the heart of the city, which the municipality wanted to upgrade both aesthetically and to create more activity in the space. The project was in a early stage and initial explorations had been done by the stakeholders by conducting observations and discussions in the team, and initial idea generation with drawings by the landscape architects in the team. Town planning is important to understanding the idea ´think globally, act locally´. The management and development of urban space and objects within this space, highly impacts the surrounding environment. When planning on changing the dynamics of a space and the objects in this space, the focus of the critical design work was to develop (social) structures that facilitate individuals (stakeholders) in critiquing and improving themselves and in the society in which they function. As a designer, it was exciting to get the opportunity to serve a local site, the town square, by conducting critical design workshops with stakeholders and local citizens. The researchers role in the present case was not simply as a designer or even a critical designer, but as a designer as author/change agent [2, 6].

The learning sciences and product design community have participated in developing countless artifacts, technological objects, tools and principles for designing them, but less commonly in this design work is a critical agenda. Borrowing on the language used in ethnography, a critical agenda is one that calls into question and potentially disrupt existing practices structures; it communicates a commitment that the work reflects a critique on the status quo, even exposing inequitable power structures, resource allotment, divisions of labour, or dis-empowerment [10]. The idea is that a critical curriculum carries within it a disruptive agenda that can be implemented by transforming the curriculum and the contexts in which the designs are being realized.

2.3 Discussion workshops and focus group interviews

The first stage of the critical design work consisted of a series of one-hour discussion workshops with the stakeholders. With the intention of investigating new possibilities for the town square, and in this case the use of critical design for public space, the initial exploration also aimed for using qualitative interviews [11] within a focus group of potential users to understand their goals and needs. ´Note that these interviews at this stage are not focused on functionality and design, the goal is to understand the needs and challenges presented by a particular situation.´ [12]

The ability to ´go deep´ was the intention of discussion workshops with the stakeholders. By asking questions that explored a wide range of concerns related to the town square that resulted in a series of themes and possible product ideas to be developed and used further in the following participatory design workshops. The discussion workshops led to a basic understanding of information and to problem finding related to the town square. ¨*You feel lonely, vulnerable and monitored in the middle of the square and wish to draw against the facades*¨, said one of the stakeholders. Another stakeholder commented that: ¨*The space is undefined and lacks program. It is indistinct what to do there and nothing captures the interest*´. Product ideas ranging from activity spaces, stairs, seating, stepping stones in water and a drinking fountain were some of the ideas that came out of the discussion workshop with the team. Some of these themes and ideas will be explored further in the critical design workshops. Also issues of ownership, alienation, social activity/interaction and the boundaries between private and public space emerged from conducting these discussion workshops.

2.4   Urban Play: Critical (conceptual) design workshops

The second stage of this study is participatory design [10, 14] through critical design workshops, with potential users and a focus group consisting of local citizens. Through an 'urban play' workshop with a local high school explorations of what design of *X* might be will be conducted and the development of possible futures/scenarios: What if´s? [7, 13]. The next stage of the research will describe a participatory design framework based on engagement activities via participation [10], by implementing a critical design framework and methodology and testing it out as a participatory workshop, which will take place in Kongsvinger Mars 2015. By using a conceptual participatory design framework for urban planning and the planning of objects for urban space, various forms of knowledge and enhanced support can be integrated for stakeholders´ participation within urban planning. The aim of using such participatory design process is to raise the qualities and values of product design for public space.

By conducting workshops with potential users and further by presenting critical design proposals, the

initial aim is to challenge the stakeholders and focus group individually to complete the question 'What if?' with ideas, questions or concerns that come to their minds, related with the proposals and to the topic of public space. Design exploration often seeks to test ideas and to ask ¨What if?¨, but also to provoke, criticize, and experiment to reveal alternatives to the expected and traditional, to transcend accepted paradigms, to bring matters a head, and to be proactive and societal in its expression. Often driven by ideals or theory, design exploration provides what we see as a necessary space for aesthetic concerns in interaction design research [13],

3   FINDINGS

The findings of this study was therefore a result of a series of discussion workshops that involved testing out a critical artifact methodology with stakeholders to see how critical design can contribute to create reflection and debate in and about public space. By challenging the observer to participate in constructing the meaning of the object, their questions, interpretations and criticism becomes part of its meaning. The proposals suggest alternative values to those already enshrined in outdoor spaces and objects, by using a set of means such as estrangement, para-functionality, alienation, social fiction, poetics and cautionary tales by going beyond function and by exploring critical roles for objects, through using i.e. estrangement to open the space between people and objects in public space for discussion and criticism. Examples from the case in public space can be transferred to industrial practice, through exploring the concepts of alienation, playfulness and interaction. These experiences can add new dimensions to visual form. The result is a toolbox of concepts and ideas for developing and communicating design proposals that explore issues about public space. The aim was to create a toolbox of strategies for critical design.

3.1   Value fictions

In Design Noir [5], Dunne and Raby argues that one way complicated pleasures can happen through design is through the development of ´value fictions´. Through these scenarios, the aim is to encourage the viewers to ask themselves why the value embodied in the proposal seem ´fictional´ or ´unreal´, and to question the social and cultural mechanisms that define what is real or fictional. This is done by developing alternative and often gently provocative artifacts which set out to engage people through humour, insight, surprise and wonder [5]. The strategy of using such value fictions through the use of conceptual design proposals in discussion workshops with the stakeholders and the local citizens, based on the themes from the focus group interviews are intended findings in the further research.

3.2   Poetic techniques of aesthetic estrangement

By borrowing means from Anthony Dunne, whose attempt to enhance the critical distance between the electronic object and the human subject through introducing and exploring poetic techniques of aesthetic estrangement that is reminiscent of the writing of Walter Benjamin, or the methods of avante-garde theorist/performers such as John Cage, rather than those associated with university-based academic PhD´s in applied electronic engineering [5]. These poetic techniques of estrangement will be explored in the creation of the critical (provocative) artifacts for the critical design workshops and the findings will be demonstrated in the further stage of the research.

3.3   Forms of narratives

Critical design works through narratives that depict fictive social scenarios [5, 14] as a means to visualize alternatives, often even evoking dark humour. Storytelling situates the product in the system of use that allows the user to understand and engage with the design. In some critical design works the story is embedded in the object, through the materials and the form the object takes. The objects function as a critical language through subversion of familiar use and archetypal objects, but with the more speculative critical design objects with more unfamiliar characteristics of objects it requires a detailed narrative. By scenario building and prototyping, the critical artifacts to be used in the critical design workshops, the findings will be achieved through narrative ways of naming, film, photography and can be other mediums than the object itself [5].

4   DISCUSSION

The research aims to map out the possibilities of using critical artifact methods and critical objects to stimulate to discussion about design and design objects. Mainstream and conventional design

describes design activity that represents a governing mentality in product design [14]. Matthew Malpass argues that, ´in mainstream design, the market provides strong incentives for designers to participate in economic systems that are arguably beyond individuals ability to confront.´ [14]. This research argues that by borrowing the means of art and thereby creating discussion about the limitations of product design in public space when it comes to values, relations, user-friendliness and how spaces and objects can limit our experiences. The aim is for this critical design practice to position in a research context is a playful activity that resists and challenges mainstream design and academic stereotype [14]. Through a discussion through a series of critical design workshops, key concepts for a critical design methodology will be outlined. The further work will discuss the potential of design as public/applied art, to improve the values and the quality of our relationship to our artificial environment of public space. In this context the intention is to move from traditional understanding of function into the realms of the poetic, were the critical designer as a researcher aims to encourage reflection on design, design objects and everyday life in public space. Through the critical conceptual workshops key concepts of poetics, para-functionality, social fictions and estrangement will be described as a means to illustrate how critical design can function as an affective medium. The projects therefore also sets out to stimulate to discussion and debate among designers, stakeholders and the public about the quality of public space, developing a position that is both critical and optimistic.

5   CONCLUSION: A TOOLBOX OF CONCEPTS

The research focuses on critical design. The project sets out to develop a design approach and a critical design method for making conceptual design proposals and objects that encourage meaningful reflection on design and public space. The outcome at this phase is the development of some beginning methods and tools to understand and try to create a language of critical design and critical thinking in public space. The results have some common features and thematic categories that will be developed further in the project for the use of design as tools for various critiques in public space.

The intention of the research conducted and in the following project is to design a collection of several conceptual design proposals that shift focus from design and object to the idea and concept, challenging ideas, traditions and the users. The experiments are not for the objects to be a set of practical proposals, but to open up to conversation among the collaborators and viewers about the value that the might embody. The imaginative encounters staged by the objects reflect the mission to provoke a dialogue of the role of objects and the state of design and objects of this time. This challenges the observer to participate in constructing their meaning, with their questions, interpretations and criticism becoming a part of its meaning. The proposals suggest alternative values to those already enshrined in outdoor spaces and objects/furniture. By using concept mapping [11], important themes emerged through the research, such as social interaction, the boundaries between personal and public space, Another important development is of a set of means such as estrangement, para-functionality, alienation, poetics and cautionary tales [2]. By going beyond function and to explore critical roles for objects by using i.e. estrangement to open the space between people and objects in public space requires discussion and criticism [2, 5] which will be explored in further research. Through testing out the means of alienation, playfulness and interaction, these experiences that can add new dimensions to visual form. Therefore a result is a toolbox of concepts and ideas for developing and communicating design proposals to explore issues about public space when it comes to for instance alienation [2]. The goal is to create a ´toolbox´ of strategies for critical design.

The next phase of this research is a series of workshops that involves testing out the critical artifact methodology [10] in a team with a stakeholder to see how critical design can contribute to create reflection and debate in and about public space. By visualizing alternative possible futures in public space and by redefining the functions and conventions, the next phase will discuss how critical design can be structured and how it can contribute to design for public space by attempts to go beyond conventional definitions of functionalism to include the poetic. The result of the findings of the research and study is to develop a series of tools and models that will enable me to develop my own critical design methodology. The research is to challenge design and hopefully in future work also to challenge the field of critical design. To question how it might adapt to remain meaningful. Such engagement can add value to critical design practice and by extension hopefully add value to the theoretical and methodological foundation [15] of the product design principle and to product design education.

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