

## **Editorial**

# **Proceedings from the Nordcode Seminar Participation and Dialogue**

This issue of FORMakademisk is the result of a cooperative effort involving the Nordcode research network, the Department of Product Design at Akershus University College and the FORMakademisk. It builds on the *Participation and Dialogue* seminar, held in May 2010, which was supported by Nordforsk, The Norwegian Research Council and Kjeller Science Park. Before moving into a description of articles from the seminar, we will briefly introduce the Nordcode research network.

### **Design Semantics Research Initiative: Nordcode**

The Nordcode initiative grew from several seeds. In the late 1990s, enthusiasm for design research was apparent in Nordic countries, but small scattered groups of devotees continued to struggle with design research issues as more or less solitary researchers.

While there was specific interest in design semantics at the time, cooperation was rare. In 1998, a research project on the topic was given internal funding by the University of Art and Design Helsinki (today called Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture), and a few doctoral students could start working on their theses on a full-time basis. At the same time, two pioneering theses were about to be completed in Sweden, at the Chalmers University of Technology. It also became obvious that MA students needed to be exposed to semantic aspects of design on a more regular basis. From the mid-1980s, occasional workshops and seminars had been organized and headed by Klaus Krippendorff and Reinhart Butter, among others. But more was needed. The University of Art and Design Helsinki had published the proceedings of some international seminars on research activities in the field (*Form and Vision*, 1987; *Product Semantics*, 1990; *Semantic Visions in Design*, 1990; *Objects and Images*, 1992; *Design—Pleasure or Responsibility?*, 1995). In Sweden, Rune Monö, the grand old master of industrial design, collected theoretical approaches and experiences for his textbook *Design for Product Understanding*, which was published in 1997. A variety of initiatives demonstrated the growing awareness of the problematic field of design semantics.

The stage was set for research funding application in Nordic countries. Fortunately, Nordforsk (NorFA, at the time) began to award grants for planning meetings, which allowed some researchers to meet in Gothenburg in 2000 to see what we had come up with and how we could move forward. Lena Koskinen, Soile Pasanen and Susann Vihma from Finland met with Anders Warell and P-O Landgren (Sweden) and Jan Michl (Norway), as well as a number of interested others. At this meeting, the concrete planning of a network got underway, and a program for a Nordic MA course was initiated, which subsequently developed into an online course offering.

Once the focus of the network had been agreed upon, design research devotees from Denmark and Norway were contacted. The network established itself in 2004, adopting the name Nordcode (referring to Nordic and coding, encoding and decoding). The network acquired funding from Nordforsk in 2005 (3+2 years). As this happened, there was some competition going on, and eventually another network was established with a different emphasis and organizational structure, see Nordes.org. The main activities of Nordcode are described on its

website, Nordcode.net, including yearly international seminars, papers and doctoral courses. It is important to note that Nordcode has not limited itself exclusively to Nordic input, keeping its doors open to all interested parties. Nordcode emphasizes openness, and participants from France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the UK and the United States have applied or been invited to network events. Active research is, however, an important criterion for participation.

The topic of the Nordcode network was deliberately set out broadly as a “Nordic network for research on communicative product design”, so as to allow expansion and the inclusion of different theoretical and methodological approaches. The purpose of this definition was to prevent the network from developing a centralized power structure and limiting itself to a single doctrine or design ideology, which is a fate that easily threatens any organization. The communicative aspects of design has expanded into usability, and into artistic and aesthetic considerations. The point has been to include scholars rather than exclude them, because design research is conceived of as a still young discipline that stands in need of collaboration and confrontation rather than the advancement of one specific subject matter. This strategy has proven to be a rewarding one, especially for young researchers, who can learn a lot from one another. Open-mindedness has been the strength of the network, together with collegial criticism and a concern for getting work done.

Over the years, a large number of researchers have taken part in the activities of the network. We can state that the network has provided a forum for regular design discussions on a truly inter-Nordic and international level, allowing doctoral students to establish and maintain close contacts. The first students have now finished their theses in their respective universities, encouraged by senior colleagues active in Nordcode (Kyle Kilbourn at the University of Southern Denmark, Monika Hestad at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Outi Turpeinen and Nithikul Nimkulrat at the University of Art and Design Helsinki, Viktor Hjort af Ornäs at Chalmers and Elin Olander at Lund University, among others). Their topics cover usability, management and artistic production, with an emphasis on insight into design semantics. The open process of Nordic collaboration has proven fruitful, and has spurred on researchers in their intellectual work. Informal network gatherings, coupled with strict seminar schedules, have been effective in supporting critical discourse, and new ideas for works in progress are examined in their early stages.

Aspects of design semantics are evident in the publications and arguments produced within the network, but this aspect of design research still needs special emphasis, because of the current heavy design research orientation toward technology and marketing in business contexts. Several studies have shown that questions concerning meaning production, signification, symbolic content, style and aesthetic evaluation cannot be avoided or disregarded in creating and implementing successful design strategies. Design outcomes always reveal cultural emphases, semantics, value preferences and individual worldviews. Therefore, knowledge of semantic qualities has a decisive impact on the construction of the built environments in which people act, and on the milieus that influence their lives. Style, ambience and mood can be directed towards the desirable aims by knowing more about design semantics,

### **The 10<sup>th</sup> Nordcode Seminar at the Product Design Institute, Kjeller**

The 10th Nordcode seminar, *Participation and Dialogue*, was held in 2010 at the Kjeller Science Park, hosted by the Product Design Institute at Akershus University College (from 2011 Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, HiOA) and organised by Tore Gulden, Arild

Berg, Astrid Skjerven and June Tolsby. The research profile of the institute concerns product design, and more specifically, materiality, processes and the future of the environment. The seminar's theme, *Participation and Dialogue*, was well-suited to sustainable design methodology, which acts as the basis for the research performed at the institute. Sustainable product design can be promoted by a holistic approach, which requires multi-disciplinary processes, participatory methods and dialogue across professions.

The seminar was inspired by previous Nordcode events and was organized to encourage dialogue through informal and social meetings, combined with academic presentations and discussions. The 18 participating researchers presented their papers in parallel sessions, while master's students from the organizing institution gave presentations on their projects to participating PhD students and experienced researchers in small workshop sessions. Researchers were thus introduced to students' activities in the studios, and participants got to know each other in a cooperative manner, by discussing both design practice and research. These workshops were conducted partly with the intention of inspiring students to meet people with different research perspectives and to become familiar with research as something attainable and valuable for their careers. Another intention of the workshops was to create environments in which the researchers could have informal discussions and familiarize themselves with developments in other countries.

As an introduction to the *Participation and Dialogue* seminar, a lecture on a socially oriented approach to product development, entitled *Artistic Sense - a key concept in action research-two examples from development of sketches for the change in fishing industry and in cultivated landscape*, was given by Kurt Aagard Nielsen and Birger Steen Nielsen (Roskilde University). Following this, Liz Sanders (Ohio State University) elaborated on sustainable potential within the field of participatory product design in a lecture entitled *Sustainable Innovation through Participatory Prototyping*, in which she presented projects carried out in cooperation with industry and health institutions, based on participatory research methods in the design process. Anders Warell (School of Industrial Design, Lund) then emphasized the importance of a semantic approach as a means of dialogue and experience in his lecture, *From the Material to the Immaterial – Reflections on User Experiences in Design*.

The seminar concluded with a Participatory dinner, with both students and researchers taking part in the preparations in groups, each of which had a specific task. The tables and room were decorated and the cooking of a three-course meal was carried out with the guidance of trained chefs. The success of this dinner contributed to the inclusive atmosphere of the seminar, and affirmed the idea that research activities can be supported through the formation and strengthening of social networks. One of the academic aims of the seminar was to invite all participants to develop their working papers into full referee papers, to be published in the FORMakademisk journal.



Students and researchers while making a Participatory dinner at the Nordcode Seminar, spring 2010.

## The Articles

The first article in this issue of FORMakademisk is called *Design as Language – a Misconception?* The underlying assumption of this invited article by Susann Vihma is that the language metaphor and concepts derived from linguistics do not do justice to the interpretation of design objects, particularly with regard to their visual qualities. This prevents the assessment of the cultural significance of design. Because design is often compared to verbal language, Vihma claims that it is worthwhile to take a closer look at transitions from the verbal to the visual in interpretations and analyses. This article discusses some topics that frequently appear in this context. In particular, claims made by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and Krippendorff (2006) are discussed, as their approaches are widely applied in design discourses in journals, schools and exhibition catalogues.

The second article in the issue was developed by a group of researchers in Aarhus: Jørgen Rasmussen, Bo Schiønning Mortensen and Birgitte Geert Jensen. Their contribution, *Preparing design students for strategic design. How visualisation and concept development can inform the process of change in organisations* describes an innovation project in which design students worked with five companies through two projects. This paper shows how the design profession's traditional visual tools and methods for concept development can be used to facilitate discussions by companies facing strategic challenges. It also underlines the importance of rethinking design skills and communication when moving into strategic processes.

André Liem works on collaborative projects at NTNU in Norway, where design students get involved with the industry. In his article, *Teaching strategic and systems design to facilitate collaboration and learning*, he describes three alternative studio projects for teaching strategic and systems design, carried out with the participation of Norwegian companies. Based on a mentorship learning concept, challenges pertaining to systems thinking, collaborative learning and design were introduced in the Vertical Design Studio. Liem's analysis shows that the Norwegian industry is supportive of strategic design, but is rather conservative and risk averse with regard to accepting and implementing radical innovation initiatives.

*User Requirements of Furniture Influenced by a Move to a Senior Housing- Focus Group Interviews on Changes for People in the Third Age* is an article written by Oskar Jonsson, Lena Sperling, Britt Östlund and Elisabeth Dalholm Hornyánszky, all of whom are based at Lund University in Sweden. Their piece concerns user-centred design approaches within the field of furniture design for the elderly. By carrying out focus-group interviews, they studied how people express their thoughts about changes when moving to and living in an apartment in senior housing facilities, and what impact this has on their opinions of furniture and other interior products. The paper discusses the complexity involved in the research assignment in terms of communicating and bringing end-user knowledge and experiences to life, and suggests that designers benefit from carrying out or being involved in user-centred research.

Kristin Støren Wigum and Anne Guttormsen Vinsnes deal with design and health in their article, *The encounter between two research disciplines–innovation through rethinking values and mealtime in nursing homes*. They state that more than 44,000 Norwegian citizens live in nursing homes, facing many health problems related to malnutrition and under-nourishment. The aim of the project described in the article has been to explore how to improve the quality of mealtime in nursing homes. Crossing disciplinary frontiers is of great importance to this work. In the present study, the authors have implemented a cross-disciplinary approach, and by rethinking values, have discovered innovative solutions and strategies that might have been difficult to discover through a traditional, single disciplinary approach.

Beata Sirowy has written an article with a philosophical gaze on user-related problems. She has called her article; *Among paradigms: Major ways of framing user-related problems in contemporary architectural discourse*. Her review of contemporary architectural theory indicates that, while user-related concerns have not been absent from the discourse, their discussion remains both fragmented and incidental. Seeking reasons for this situation, the paper discusses the major paradigms underpinning contemporary architectural discourse, and explains how various paradigms ground different approaches to users. It reveals limitations within the dominating conceptual positions (positivism/post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism), and argues for the relevance of phenomenology in supporting more user- and context-sensitive architectural practice.

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