

Working paper for Nordcode Doctoral Seminar: “Thesis Basics. Semantic Approach in design Research” October 26-28 2005

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Background:

Industrial design can have strong technical touch, but in order to perform an optimized design work it is also necessary to make use of abilities and emotions that are related to the inner experiences and private associations of the individual. Ornamentation/decoration is a human form of expression. I will look into its contents, what is communicated, how and when.

Theoretical framework:

Industrial design as a research area is relatively new and there is a lack of research by practicing industrial designers. This provides a risk of low quality research due to lack of critical mass. The research that has been so far has had its source from economy, art history, ergonomics, and product development. This is obvious mainly by the fact that traditions, nomenclature and theories from these research areas are being put forward as relevant or even necessary for design research.

I do not prescribe to a specific theoretical framework. This is due to the search for subject specific theories. Thoughts and exemplifications in relation to the question of the boarder between research and art can be an important theoretical area. Being a mix of different theoretical frameworks myself, I am not now in the position to point out anyone special, and exclude the rest. If I anyhow reluctantly should choose someone/something that seems more relevant to me at this point, it could be Claude Lévi-Strauss (see methods), rhetoric and eventually phenomenology, which I most recently have started to look into. Theories emanating from Ethnology and Cultural Studies can also come to use.

I also intend to make place for some practical design work in the process, hoping that this work may be a part of the creation of a research traditions within the field.

Approach:

- The definition of the concept/term of decoration. The work includes of the creation of a systematic mapping of where décor is used, in middle between man material and artefact. The system can be used to relate to, to make generalizations from, and to extrude patterns that enhance understanding. The classification could be based on the functionality of decorations. The method is system analysis.
- Etymological survey of the word decoration and adjacent terms or concepts that are related to non-functional elements of an object.
- Survey of surface decorations on functional objects, like tools. Relating to history, ideology and the fluctuation in valuation of ornament, which I believe to be more visible when design is performed in relation to function.
- Survey of the concept style focusing on categorization, representation and reduction. Different viewpoints and work processes between companies and designers, styling (looking for similarities) or deconstruction (working with differences)
- Looking into examples where decoration emanating from a specific cultural heritage sphere is used in modern design. How is this perceived when placed in a culture outside of the original?
- The relation between object and decoration. There are at least two categories of decorated objects. One is where the main function is decorative; the object is the carrier of the decoration.

This can for example be pillows, cloth, wallpaper, decorated architectural elements, and mosaics. The other relation is when decoration is placed on an object with some other specific function. A third relation can be when the object is carrying information, to communicate something through the way they appear. Example is flags, signs and so on. Historically decoration has been placed on objects for a number of reasons, but for the most it was added to enrich the object, to add value. The industrial revolution made decoration cheap and possible to mass-produce. Did the accessibility take away value from the decoration, or had it to do with the incompatibility between object and decoration, as it was shown during this period of production shift, when decoration was used to show of techniques?

Methods:

- Bricolage or “the science of the concrete”. Bricolage can be formulated as “*the creation of structure out of events*”. There are similarities between design and the way of seeking knowledge that the anthropologist and structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss named *Bricolage* in his book “*The savage mind*”. One similarity is how the Bricoleur tries to make use of his or her intuition and senses. Another is the way different inputs are used, not always as intended, but always with the purpose of gaining more knowledge..

He [the bricoleur] uses an inventory of semi-defined elements: they are at the same time abstract and concrete. They carry a meaning, given to them by their past uses and the bricoleur's experience, knowledge and skill, a meaning which can be modified, up to a point, by the requirements of the project and the bricoleur's intentions¹

The bricoleur always puts into his work something of himself. I will try to achieve a similar approach in my thesis; first and foremost because I am an industrial designer and the work process can and should be executed in a subject-specific manner. I have also worked many years with projects in cultural history, so the input is due to come from more than one research area.

- Cultural experiments - creativity and the unconstrained work; a vision of design praxis as method. Efficiency sometimes becomes synonymous to “not make any unnecessary work”. Efficiency then relates to the amount of time that passes for performing a work, and not the amount of work that is produced. The evaluation of time and quantity is based upon the apprehension of a determined goal. An industrial designer must work with an open aim. One hypothesis is that unnecessary/unconstrained work is a very useful source of inspiration, development and renewal, and therefore has to be protected and respected. This belief is also a reason to perform the doctoral studies in an intuitive and inquiring way and make room for practical design work, illustrating the research questions. This method is the most difficult to maintain and cultivate in an environment that is already formulated by academic research traditions.
- System analysis. System thinking is the concept of feedback, i.e. that every influence is both cause and effect. System analysis tries to see things, often a problem in view of the interaction between different systems or subsystems (parts) and the whole. It is a mental modelling method where you by visualizing patterns and relations of complex problems or of the principle for an organisation can understand of the object of inquiry even if the object itself is ungraspable (black box). System analysis is a theory of self organization and a visual modelling habit.

The emotional value of objects (working title)

Possible questions at issue:

¹ Louridas, Panagiotis; Design Studies 20, 1999, p. 518

1. **Decoration in relation to purpose.** Why do humans decorate their environment? What do we communicate through decoration? One possibility is that what we communicate from a general point of view is human. If we look at body decorations in tribal societies, we do not assume that they only are made out for aesthetic needs. We presuppose that they mean something, that they have a purpose. Body decorations communicate affiliation, standing, civil status, events of decisive importance, moods and so on. Are there decorations in our society that communicate the same things as in a tribal society?
2. **Decoration in relation to experience.** In this modern acquisitive society there is an abundance of decorations. In what way do they affect us? Is it through interpretations, emotions and evaluation? The cultural heritage? The ego and the personal history? Style and taste?
3. **Decoration in relation to content.** Can design be better with the proper decoration? We tend to assign decoration to a category of unimportant and unnecessary phenomena. Why do we have this generalist view on decoration? What happens in a world where the cultural limits of decorative elements vanish, while the understanding of the communicative aspects not is so easy to comprehend or transfer?
4. **Decoration in relation to evaluation.** Can decoration increase the value of the object? When we as consumers buy decorated objects we perceive the choice as based on something else than pure functional aspects guiding us. Is it reasonable to believe that there are individual, cultural and social preferences and norms that control how we evaluate the relation between object and decoration?
5. **Decoration in relation to "corpus".** Where are decorations allowed, or more or less appropriate, and why? The surface closest to man, both physically and emotionally is the body. Since the human became domiciled, and retained a higher material level of living, decoration moved away from the body, and on to first clothes, and then further to the things we own, the objects around us and our physical environment. Which border line have we in our society for what is appropriate decoration on the appropriate place.
6. **Decoration in relation to function.** Do we value decoration that has a relation to the use of the object higher, than other decoration? William Morris stated that decorating was something that the human did in order to add joy to production work, that otherwise would be intolerable. That can be one reason, but it does not explain the whole complex meaning of decoration. Decoration has from time needed excuses, reasons for their presence. There is a kind of morality in the critique against ornamentation. Decoration is a human form of expression. One hypothesis doesn't have to exclude all other explanations. That should be as to say that we speak just because it is boring with silence, and not take notice of the content of what we are saying. There is to my knowledge no contradiction between the fact that we speak to avoid silence and because we want to communicate something with our words.

Expected result:

In a global society, it becomes more and more important that designers can master their own cultural and social heritage and transform it in a way that can attract and evoke emotions outside of their own production sphere. The aim of my thesis is to create a basis for understanding why decoration has its role, and how it can come to better use in product design.

The differences in purpose and viewpoint between designer and industry have not been given the attention it deserves. Unfortunately these discrepancies augment a lack of understanding between designers and industry. This obstructs cooperation, and impairs the outcome of the collaboration. Therefore the differences need to be analyzed.

I aim at my research being a tool for handling choices regarding decoration or a help to upgrade decoration as an equally valid aesthetic element with a self-evident semantic content, so that it is more obvious to companies that decoration is far too serious for to use as a mere styling component.

The purpose is also to formulate how different work processes will result in different outcomes which can lead to different evaluation of the decoration used. The designer in his/her profession can be compared to that of the marketer, the craftsman, the artist. How do they use decoration? What has changed through history? What results can come out of different perspectives? How does this affect the way we see and appreciate decoration?

Can industrial designers by understanding and integrating knowledge of these qualities in the product design, and making necessary considerations in the design process, become better designers with more accurate design?

With a deepened understanding of design processes and design work and the increased respect for unnecessary work and the benefit coming out of it; then maybe the designer could add an extra percentage for inutile work on the bill because everybody knows that it creates surplus; and that would make me very content.

How can research within the design field be performed? For whom do we perform research? I would like if my thesis could shed some light on that question. I would like to do a work that could be useful for practising designers. The gap between research and practice is not necessary very useful. And I would like to alter the view of research as being of no use to practitioners to instead be perceived as thrilling and inspiring.