THE
Danish Design DNA —
Foreword –

The Danish Design Council has investigated the DNA of Danish design. The result is 10 values, which provide a picture of Danish design both past and present.

The 10 values were determined on the basis of a design process, in which the DNA of Danish Design project served as a platform for a number of initiatives. Applying various themes, the initiatives discussed, challenged and examined the current status of Danish design and potential future trends.

The purpose of the project is to generate renewed visibility and involvement in the dissemination of the value, which design creates for the business community and society as a whole, and the position of strength, which Danish design represents for Denmark.

However, there is no doubt that the potential is far greater, if we are able to exploit our commercial, research and educational strengths within the field of design, and if, to a much greater degree than today, we are able to brand Denmark as one of the world’s leading design nations.

From 2016 to 2017 there have been a number of master classes and panel debates, and a survey that involved interviews with 100 professionals. A preliminary result of the exploration of the DNA of Danish design is the ‘DNA Person’ with the 10 values.

This little book presents the 10 values in a historical and contemporary perspective as a contribution to debate and further exploration.
The Danish Design DNA -

Holistic

Collaborative

Craftsmanship

Durable

Social

Quality

User oriented

Factual

Simple

Human
The Danish Design DNA –
by Ida Engholm and Christian Holmsted Olesen

Denmark is one of the leading design nations in the world. Historically, Denmark's international status resulted from the work of world-renowned designers such as Arne Jacobsen, Finn Juhl, Hans J. Wegner, Børge Mogensen and Poul Kjaerholm, who were part of the so-called ‘Golden Age of Danish Design’. Rooted in a tradition of craftsmanship and applied art, these designers contributed in various ways to the evolution of a new idiom, in interaction with European Functionalist form ideologists, International Style and Organic Modernism, and marketed as ‘Danish Modern’ in the 1950s and 1960s. Their furniture and design objects caused a stir with their perfectionist detailing, their simple geometry, their bias towards use and their minimalist ‘timeless’ solutions, which became exponents of the distinctive, aesthetically conscious idiom that still defines Danish design today. In the field of furniture design, for example, contemporary designers such as Louise Campbell, Cecilie Manz, Niels Hvass and Kasper Salto are building significantly on the historic applied art tradition in interaction with new production technologies.

In the area of industrial design Denmark has produced international classic products and global brands such as Lego, B&O and Stelton, where leading designers such as Jacob Jensen and Erik Magnussen have combined a sophisticated technological approach with stringent geometric-minimalist solutions.
The Danish Design Council Investigates the DNA of Danish Design –

In 2017, the Danish Design Council, Danish design’s independent think tank, decided to consider what Danish design actually is. It is a difficult and never-ending task, and there is no clear-cut answer. But the exercise may help to create debate about what might be said to characterise Danish design among the people who work in the field of Danish design and the people who live with it.

One overall, preliminary insight from the survey is the fact that the unique character of Danish design seems to derive mainly from a practice of furniture design and product development: in other words, mainly from physical products. It was in the fields of furniture and product development in the 20th century that a decidedly design-oriented approach to work emerged, and it was primarily these physical products that helped Denmark make its unique mark on the international design scene. If we broaden the perspective, what made Danish furniture and product so special were the special sociality and culture, from which the products emerged, and which today come into play in a far wider range of design phenomena and occurrences, and which perhaps define what we might broadly refer to as ‘a Danish design culture’.

Today Danish design is developed in an increasingly global context, while design as a field is subject to continued expansion. This is reflected in the diverse forms, in which design is expressed: from classic product development, graphic communication, branding and digital design to the design of systems, services and strategic visions.

If by ‘design culture’ we mean the formative cultures that lie behind the creation of design, the success of Danish design culture possibly relates to the fact that Denmark has been voted one of the happiest countries in the world and that, for the third consecutive year, Copenhagen has been voted the city in the world with the highest quality of life. Maybe this also relates to the fact that, ever since the development of welfare in the post-war years, Denmark’s towns and cities and societal structure have been based on a uniquely holistic conception of social commitment and high quality architecture and design: beautiful urban facilities, well-furnished kindergartens, municipal play areas and well-designed hospital wards. Over the past hundred years, this evolution has created synergy between the major social movements such as the cooperative movement, organised labour and advanced design, with the result that today’s Danes live in an intensely creative and artistically advanced society, which everyone can enjoy.
Danish design culture was shaped by the evolution of the democratic welfare state, where there was political desire for all citizens to have access to good products and move in environments of the highest possible quality. Design is a medium for culture, and in Denmark it is expressed in the form of holistic solutions, which pervade the design of our public systems and urban spaces. Due largely to this, Denmark has special status in terms of what we refer to broadly as ‘total design’.

In few other countries do society’s companies, institutions and individuals have the means and motivation to invest in good design. Throughout history there has been political will to come up with holistic solutions across design genres and institutions.

There are countless examples. An urban planner and urban designer like Jan Gehl, on the basis of Danish precedents, advises the entire world on how to create people-friendly urban spaces. Copenhagen Airport is referred to as one of the most beautiful and user-friendly airports in the world. Throughout Denmark disabled and blind people can get around effortlessly, because public buildings and urban spaces are designed according to the principles of accessibility. Just look at Islands Brygge, where excellent urban planning has created one of the most diverse and exciting environments for urban life. In the summer it is packed with people living together across religions, cultures and social divides, while in winter it is a setting for winter swimming in a former industrial port with crystal-clear water. Many foreigners, who visit us, simply cannot understand how it is possible.


THE DANISH DESIGN DNA –

10 values –

Danish design is diverse and multi-faceted, so any attempt to define what characterises Danish design naturally entails a certain lack of complexity. Initially, the Danish Design Council consulted 100 Danish professionals. The responses were surprisingly similar and resulted in some common traits, which can possibly form the basis for a definition of Danish design – a Danish design DNA. The results of the survey have been summed up in 10 values. Some interrelate or partially overlap, while others relate to unique features. Maybe the priorities could have been different, and some features replaced by others, but we can assume that the empirical foundation of the survey has identified some essential core features.

We outline them as a contribution to discussion and further debate, and they are illustrated in the form of a ‘DNA Person’, emphasising the human aspect that we assume to be the focal point of any design. On the basis of the preliminary survey, we have singled out 10 values, which are both historic and contemporary, and which also define potential future trends.

Social –
Danish design is social. It is rooted in a social democratic understanding that is contingent on the fact that Danish society, despite changing, even centre-right governments, is dominated by a socialist mind-set, which in its freest market economy form is social liberal. The design theorist, Hans Carl Finsen uses the expression ‘social-aesthetic’ to describe national Danish taste. According to Finsen, this is anchored in Denmark’s cultural radicalism of the 1930s. In a broader perspective, it can be linked to the democratic welfare state and the above-mentioned social movements, which seem to have been formative for Danish design culture. Today these ideals are reflected in the ideologies that underlie contemporary public design and urban planning, in which the likes of user orientation and accessibility are paramount.
Quality –
Danish design focuses on quality: partly in the form of long-lastingness with minimalist, ‘timeless’ solutions, and partly in the choice of material and details: for example, in Danish furniture design, which is designed to last in both utilitarian and stylistic terms. The Danish tradition of craftsmanship helped to refine both concept and form, enriching the quality of Danish design to the extent that Danish designers seem almost morbidly preoccupied with structures, joints, and materials and their processing and details. Perhaps there is a quasi neo-platonic notion behind the design: the idea must be expressed in the ultimate way. The Canadian designer Bruce Mau curated an exhibition on Danish design and named it ‘Too perfect’. It all seems to stem from the craftsmanship, in which sensory perception, surface treatment, joints and the traditional, already existing idea predominate.

User-oriented –
Danish design is oriented towards its users and the context, for which it is designed. Denmark is an old agricultural nation, and much of the common-sensical design has its roots in a tradition of creating good tools: a tool aesthetic, in which use is given higher priority than the circumstances of production. This concept was perpetuated in the Danish version of Modernism in the 20th century, when the major furniture architects placed Denmark in the international spotlight. Some architects suggested that Danish design was more a case of ‘form follows function’ than international Modernism. Designers were more interested in the human, utilitarian dimension. The architect, Kay Fisker referred to ‘the functional tradition’ as a regionally and historically rooted concept, a special way of designing in Denmark. They used local materials, and the orientation towards function was nothing new. In a contemporary context, user orientation may have influenced the fact that Danish design is currently a leader in the field of Danish design, where putting oneself the user’s shoes is a prerequisite for successful user interfaces. Even in the early days of the Internet, Danish interface specialists such as Jacob Nielsen and Rolf Molich set international standards for user-friendliness on the Internet, and today we are global leaders in the field of computer game manufacturing at a high artistic and commercial level.

Playdead: INSIDE adventure game (2016).
**Human**

Danish Design is human, because it is social and focuses on the user. The design researcher, Lars Dybdahl says that Danish design is empathetic, because it is rooted in the Danish welfare State. This means that social solicitude and ergonomic consideration are part of the user-oriented features in the development of designs. Danish design is referred to as a particularly mature, human or even poetic version of Modernism, in which people and their surroundings are incorporated into the design. Its roots in the tried and tested ideas of history and its focus on sensuousness and use, combined with functional consideration, seem to make the design impervious to major criticism and therefore long-lasting. Today, foreign designers draw inspiration from the Danish design tradition. When the British designer, Jasper Morrison or the Japanese designer, Naoto Fukusawa refer to 'Supernormal Design' one cannot help thinking of Kaare Klint and Børge Mogensen, who talked about creating a chair from a good old family.

**Factual**

Danish design is factual, straightforward. Much of Danish industrial product design is reminiscent of the pragmatism, rationality, functionality and simplicity of German design, but Danish design is often more honed when it comes to surfaces and detail. Take, for example, the perfect surface of the Fuga power points, which have a textural quality, as if the plastic were a piece of wood. Or take the simplification of Stelton's utility items, which both figuratively and in utilitarian terms feature clear geometry and regularity. They are visible in both exclusive and more discreet products and part of everyday custom.

Knud W. Engehardt: Signage concept and street signs for the municipality of Gentofte.

Simple

Danish design is simple. This is reflected in the aesthetic and details of the tools, and in the fact that Danish design, in a national interpretation of international Modernism, promoted a spartan purified look by focusing on user-orientation and the essence of the forms in pure volumes and simplification of type. The simplicity evolved from a Protestant, frugal tradition, in which moderation resulted in reined-in forms and a restrained colour scheme: a way of thinking rooted in necessity. For centuries, Danish art, architecture and applied art have cultivated the forms of antiquity in one form of classicism after another. It is probably here we find the root cause of the limited, rigid choice of materials and the often-reduced use of colours, which in turn highlight the importance of form. Even when Danish design becomes organic and symbolic (in other words, un-classical), it is marked by simplicity. Take, for example, Henning Koppel's silver pitcher, whose organic character expresses both pitcher and swan; or Verner Panton's famous S-shaped chair, which is simple, not only in its form of production (manufactured as a single piece of moulded plastic), but also in its organic, anthropomorphic shape. There is a certain sensuousness about the biomorphic shapes, which represent a special variation on the theme of Organic Modernism, evident, for example, in Arne Jacobsen's Ant chair, Finn Juhl's Pelican chair or Hans J. Wegner's Ox chair.

Durable

Danish design is durable because it balances good craftsmanship, detailing of materials and manufacturing and the formal simplification that ensure stylistic 'timelessness'. Durability is perhaps the reason why Danish design has produced so many classics on the international stage and within many different genres: from Bindelsbøll's Carlsberg logo, Mogens Koch's shelving and Kvadrat fabrics to Royal Copenhagen's blue fluted porcelain (in both its historic and contemporary versions) and the unrelentingly industrial Nilfisk vacuum cleaner, which excels in usability and durability. Today, global, design-based companies such as B&O, Kompan, Leze, Grundfos, Novo Nordisk and Fritz Hansen represent tradition-intensive gravitational centres for highly estimated quality design, which is among the prerequisites for the continuation of Denmark's central position in the international market and its current rapid growth.

Arne Jacobsen: “The Ant” chair (1952)

Thorvald Bindesbøll: The Carlsberg logo (1904).
Craftsmanship
Danish design is anchored in a tradition of craftsmanship and applied art, which valued artistic and aesthetic work. It was also craftsmanship that, in the post-war era, turned Danish design into an international brand. In 1949, when Hans J. Wegner launched his ‘Round Chair’ at the Cabinet-makers’ Exhibition in Denmark, American journalists began to write about Danish craftsmanship. The Americans referred to Wegner’s chair as ‘The Chair’, because they regarded it as the perfect chair. Wegner himself was not impressed: “There’s nothing new about it. It could’ve been made 200 years ago.” That is because it was based on excellent, ancient craftsmanship. But that is what the Americans loved; following the horrors of war, industrialisation was condemned for its complicity in the disaster. The Danes represented a historical tradition, which was disseminated in international travelling exhibitions.

They contributed to the narrative, which Kay Fisker also talked about in ‘The Functional Tradition’, of the special, historically rooted way of designing in Denmark, of which we are still so proud today.

When Poul Kjærholm began to design flat steel furniture like that of the international Modernists such as Mies van de Rohe, unlike van de Rohe, who cultivated the industrial look, Kjærholm wanted to show that steel, with the right matt chroming, could achieve the texture and sensuousness of wood. Today, when B&O conduct research into the surface treatment of aluminium, that is also about how to achieve as perfect a surface as in an old piece of hand-crafted furniture. The virtues of craftsmanship certainly live on in the contemporary Danish attitude to design.

Collaborative –
Danish design is based on creative designers’ innovative products, which means there is a strong ‘auteur’ tradition in Denmark. For much of the 20th century, designers had a craftsmanship background and could produce their prototypes themselves. They also had extensive knowledge of the manufacturing process. This had many advantages. However, when Denmark became truly industrialised in the latter half of the 20th century, design became more complex and specialised manufacturing technologies emerged. Consequently, design became more a matter of collaboration between a company and a designer.

In contemporary areas of design such as digital design, service design and strategic design, collaboration is paramount, and today most new design genres are interdisciplinary, involving not only professional designers, but also other experts. Today much design is developed in active cooperation with users: in the initial stages of idea development (as co-design); in the testing of prototypes, where users serve as informants; or, in definitive parts of the design process, as co-creators. Due to the democratic culture, Danish companies are fairly non-hierarchical and the work culture is relatively anti-authoritarian. This paves the way for innovation, because ideas for new design can come from just about anywhere in companies and organisations.
Holistic –
The history of Danish design is closely linked to the history of architecture, and many architects also work as designers. This results in a holistic approach to design. Historically, this is reflected in the likes of Arne Jacobsen’s famous SAS Hotel, in which everything from the building and the furniture (including the iconic Egg and Swan) to cutlery and door handles was designed according to the same design ideal. Take also public institutions such as DSB (the Danish national rail company), for which, in the 1980s, Jens Nielsen came up with a complete design programme, which lent a common identity to the Danish-manufactured IC3 trains, the fixtures and fittings, the signs for station buildings, the uniforms and other graphics.

Over the years, this holistic approach has also been evident, for example, in the Five Finger Plan, which was developed during Copenhagen’s rapid suburban development between the two world wars, with dense composition of the road network, traffic plans, secured ‘green areas’ and ‘systems for outdoor life’. It can also be seen in Copenhagen’s modern Metro construction and the city’s airport, which guides us effortlessly through architectural, spatial and practical sequences: from transport to and from the city, to check-in and transit areas, and to journeys out into the world.

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Copenhagen Airport, Terminal 3 and exterior.

Danish design is evolving in close interaction with global trends –
So, on one level, the attempt to pinpoint a special, separate Danish identity may be futile. Nonetheless, this survey helped to identify some defining features that can be said to be particularly Danish. They are presented here as a contribution to debate and further exploration. Key topics for future discussion would include the links between Danish design and international design. Take current external factors such as globalisation and supranational trends such as big data, 3D technologies, increasing environmental problems, overpopulation etc.: what role do they play in the evolution of Danish design today? Could the DNA of Danish design express itself even more clearly by coming up with solutions for the dominant societal problems both of today and tomorrow? Danish design is evolving in an interrelationship with international factors. In view of this, can we come up with any ideas on the direction, in which Danish design is moving or should move? Could we, for instance, discuss Danish design in a more ideologically oriented light? What is the purpose of design? What is this ‘design society’ we believe in? How do we want to promote it? How do we want to promote it? How do we want to promote it? How do we want to promote it?

There is now broad consensus that design has the potential to take on the global ‘grand challenges’. The only question is: how can we activate the role of Danish design society as a role model? Presentations and discussions from upcoming activities will be collated on an on-going basis and published for the design industry and design public as a contribution to debate.
The Design Council is the think tank of the Danish design field.

Our purpose is to promote Danish design by conceiving and exploring new perspectives on design.

We call it design freethinking. —

Se more: www.danishdesigncouncil.dk/en/

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