Research articles

Conspicuously Quotidian: Poul Henningsen on Bauhaus and the Art of Promoting Danish Modern

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In the historiography of modern architecture, it is common to understand Nordic Functionalism as the true heir of the social ideals of the early modernist architecture. While some have stressed Nordic adjustments to the ideals through a more organic and human-centred design, others have argued that it was more of a 'return', because the initial ideals were inspired by the cultivation of everyday life and the home as a work of art in Nordic artist's colonies. The latter is the central thesis of Barbara Miller Lane in National-Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries from 2000. Along the same lines Scandinavian Design is sometimes suggested as taking

over the initial ideas of the Bauhaus design. as the school was closed by the Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933. The more holistic and human-centred ideas found the right, fertile ground in the stable, budding welfare states up North, according to this line of thought. In this understanding, it seems only logical that the Danish manufacturer of the Arne Jacobsen and Poul Kjærholm furniture, Fritz Hansen, recently has acquired the Kaiser Idell Lamp, designed by the Bauhaus Werkmeister Christian Dell, as part of its brand portfolio, well even its brand heritage. The actual relationships or familiarities between Bauhaus and Danish design, though, have been much disputed in Denmark.

The Bauhaus-anniversary exhibition at the Bröhan Museum in Berlin *Nordic Design. The Response to the Bauhaus*, 2019, gave at first glance an impression of the mutual confirmation of the Bauhaus having the

best of intentions, which the Nordic designers then were the best to bring into life. The texts of the catalogue, however, document that this story is not as smooth as it seems. Tobias Hoffmann, the museum director, points out that Bauhaus was, of course, not the only source of inspiration for the modern movement of the 1920s and mentions Werkbund, Das neue Frankfurt and CIAM as other strong sources.1 It is likewise obvious that there were diverging receptions in the Nordic countries as well as critical rejections of the Bauhaus style and ideas. You could add that the 'Bauhaus style and ideas' were anything but uniform, as they changed during the years – as well as from one Bauhaus master to another. My approach here, however, is on the reception, and how the Nordic designers and critics represented diverging situations and interests in adapting the modern idiom. I will focus on the Danish discus-





Figure 1. *The Kaiser Idell Lamp*, by Christian Dell, as part of the Fritz Hansen brand universe. Photo: Fritz Hansen.

sions on Bauhaus and pick a single theme which showed to be central to the Danish tradition: the promotional value of everyday objects and the critique of conspicuously modernist designs. This was an ongoing critique that Bauhaus design often just had a modern look, while Danish design was modern in its focus on usability and social value. This is even the very topic of the text on Denmark in the Bröhan catalogue: Danish Traditionalism - More Functionalist than the Bauhaus? by Christian Holmsted Olesen, curator at Design Museum Denmark. It has been a polemic, rhetorical topos to align the self-fashioning of Danish functionalist designers with a distinct difference to international modernism. I will look into these arguments forming the Danish Design tradition to see where the interests changed and diverged, especially when the designers needed the promotional value themselves, as in the case of Poul Henningsen. Through this case I hope to explain specific conditions and constraints in the Danish reception and use of Bauhaus ideas and models.

The Modest Danish object

The Danish relations to the Bauhaus School during the years of activity, 1919–33, and



the partly quite negative, public statements by Danish designers both during these early years and in the decades to follow are systematically investigated.2 The Danish designers were well aware of the Bauhaus and some payed visits to the school, but there was a general reluctance to embrace and identify with the international beacons.3 The other Nordic countries seemed more open to bridge the gap and make links to the centres of international modernism, while spokesmen of the Danish Design tradition time and again felt the need to stress the unique, modest character of their design and warn against the superficiality of a more fashionable, international modernism. Such a protectionism is, of course, well-known in the other Nordic countries as well, but was central to the Danish Design discourse throughout the whole of twentieth century, as I have shown.4 Most explicit was the attack of Steen Eiler Rasmussen in 1960 on the insinuation that inspirations from Bauhaus were part of the success of Danish Design in the those years in his Danish article Bauhaus and the Danish Applied Arts. This reaction was peculiar as Rasmussen himself had an international career as academy professor in city planning and architectural theory. He might have been right in stating that the mentioning of Bauhaus was a promotional strategy of linking Danish Design to the international modernism. But he went very far in arguing for the very opposite character of the Danish tradition. "Alongside all the dictates of fashion and effect-seeking, however, will there not still be a need for the modest. Danish object, which is thoroughly worked, made to last and to serve as a good and solid tool?"5 He wanted the international acknowledgement and the export success to be based solidly on historical and cultural traits in the Danish tradition, here understood as getting the best out of modest assignments and scarce raw-materials. This was, for sure, part of the promotional storytelling about Danish Design that fascinated the American customers being used to heavily industrialised products.6 The Danish products, however, were designed with a distinct modern look to catch the eyes as well, as the exhibitions show.

Rasmussen tried to build a rhetorical opposition between the modern traits of Danish Design and the international modernism respectively by referring to the grand old man of Danish furniture art. "One might say that

Kaare Klint intented to make things effective, while European modernism strove to make them effectful."7 This pun on the words of 'effective' and 'effectful' might not translate well into English, but it stressed the fine line in modernist design between the urge to improve usefulness or to go for a more surprising and eye-catching modern look. Klint had commented on the Bauhaus back in 1930, when he stressed a parallel scientific approached to ergonomics and construction, however lamenting the rejection of traditional experience of form-types and materials.8 The pupils of Klint were even more eager to confirm this line as defining the Danish Design tradition. Two of them, the furniture architects Arne Karlsen and Børge Mogensen, followed up on Rasmussen's article two years later with a review of the yearly Cabinetmakers' Exhibition performing a virtual witch hunt on those of their colleagues, who - in their eyes - did not stick to the basic values of usability in a low key idiom. They criticised not only younger designers as Jens H. Quistgaard and Verner Panton but showed also examples of Finn Juhl and Arne Jacobsen as problematic. Their 'crime' was to design for an international, cosmopol-



itan market, rather than only for the average Dane, the 'beer mug for Mr. Hansen'. Following this line only a very narrow selection of design would then be part of the Danish Design tradition, and many designers and design icons would have to be excluded. It was, of course, more of a fight on words and to claim the right to define the tradition. And in this institutional fight the promotional value of everyday designs was central.

The fight continued in a special issue of the professional journal of the furniture industry, *mobilia*, published internationally in four languages, where a large group of architects, critics and manufacturers commented on the 'crisis' of Danish Design. This is in itself a marvellous mapping of the network, the actors and their roles and positions in the debate. Here another of the grand old men, Poul Henningsen, made his contribution and changed the direction of the critique. In his mind Danish Design had been off the track for long, since the whole international success was based on rather exquisite objects, not affordable solutions for everyone.

For some time we have had as our customers almost all of the whole world's rich bourgeoisie. Might not a great but hitherto unresolved task now announce itself: [making] practical

furniture for ordinary people as a sort of applied art? [...] We can hardly keep on caressing beautiful, woodwork joints. 10

The last comment hinted mainly at the late Kaare Klint himself, who used his systematic investigations of ergonomic as an excuse to cultivate joinery and hesitated to embrace industrial production wholeheartedly.

Sad Modernists

If the Klint pupils had initially thought, they had Henningsen on their side in this argument, it had its reasons in his earlier, critical position to Bauhaus and the international modernism in the late 1920s. Especially as main editor of Kritisk Revy, published 1926-28, he expressed harsh reservation against any purely modernist style that took the honour of modernisation without contributing to functional or social improvements. "The telephone, electrical lighting, central heating did not need the Modernists' propaganda to succeed. It is only the internationally constructed external sobriety and internal hollowness that needs this."11 This text called, For the Sad Modernists, is guite representative for his many attacks on, what he saw as a sad derailment of the modern movement into a mere image of white walls, glass and iron railings. Henningsen himself wanted better social housing and interior design based on industrialisation and modern materials, when needed, but did not see Le Corbusier or Walter Gropius solving these basic tasks. In a newspaper announcement for a planned guest lecture by the Bauhaus director in Copenhagen the year before, he recommends the lecture, but adds a warning:

In addition, Professor Gropius is a dangerous man. In his enthusiasm for that which is new in our time he seems virtually to anticipate eventual developments. To him it is insufficient to engage with the many and urgent modern tasks in the world of architecture and technology. He also wants to see them solved immediately, and in a self-consciously modern style.¹²

Henningsen clearly felt that the mere spectacular statements of the Bauhaus were a threat to his own mission to modernise everyday living, because it would scare off or mislead the working class from more feasible and useful solutions to societal challenges.

He went even further in a description of an interior of the Weißenhof-Siedlung by Gropius and Marcel Breuer, in the same issue of *Kritisk Revy* as *For the Sad Modernists* in 1928. Both of these critical writings were provoked by the Copenhagen visit of the Werkbund-exhibition





Figure 2. Interior with furniture by Marcel Breuer in a building by Walter Gropius at the Weisenhof-Siedlung, Werkbund Exhibition, Stuttgart 1927. *Kritisk revy* 2, 1928: 5. The same was shown in a touring exhibition visiting Copenhagen as well.

Die Wohnung, on tour after the Stuttgart show. Henningsen used the strongest possible sensorial images in his writing to underline the inhuman superficiality and the counter-intuitive form given by the living room.

The light of the hanging lamp is as harsh as barbed wire and casts a sharp shadow. The guillotine lamp in the background gnashes like sand between teeth. Shiny lights and mirror images from the glass tops of the tables and the nickel tubes of the chairs are emanating from the floor assaulting the eyes. The furniture puts blue frost bites on the thighs of the well-dressed modern woman [...]. In a moment of insanity, the interrelationship between hygiene and cosiness has been reversed and been transferred from the hospital to the living room. In this show of perpetual horror of dust, any sense for space and home has been sterilised to death.¹³



His understanding would be modified a few years later, when he even designed tubular steel chairs himself. Before we turn to his surprising change of mind, however, we have to understand his initial ideal of the informal type object. First of all, his reaction to the lighting to the room was very strong, because it went contrary to all his own attempts to tame and cultivate the harsh light of the electric bulb. "It is a fact that the electric light is defective, and its defects should not be endured in a room, where people stay." This was stated in his first manifest on his work with the PH-lamp in

Kritisk Revy in 1926 – after his presentation of the lamp at the Paris Exhibition in 1925. The Bauhaus designers seemed only to turn up this defective light and even let it ricochet around the room on all the hard surfaces, as a kind of mistaken homage of technology. Henningsen not only wanted to design a lamp to adjust the light to the human eye but developed his own 'philosophy' on how to arrange and temper the whole lighting of the room to both practical purposes and enhancement of the experience of colours and materials. "To produce the genuine effect light has to be so rich that it does not deprive the object any of its material or colour properties."15 He wanted to revitalise a culture of lighting by combining art and technology. 16 And to him the Weißenhof interior sadly demonstrated the tragic loss of such a culture by only turning up the light volume and smoothness of all surfaces to a narrow-minded, scientific gesture. He worked with new materials, mass-production and electricity but wanted to use them in the service of inhabitants enhancing the best parts of home culture. This taming of the defective technology was also the message of his advertisements for the lamp, especially in his own journal, Kritisk Revy.



Figure 3. Poul Henningsen, '1000 lights in the eyes without blinking', advertisement for the *PH-lamp*. Louis Poulsen, *Kritisk Revy* 1926.

Anonymous and Inconspicuous

You could say that Henningsen wanted to design the lighting rather than the lamp. This might be to flatter him too much, as he certainly also did 'caress' the curves of his lamps as well as add more spectacular versions to the Louis Poulsen range of products. This simplified verdict, however, expressed a central line of thought among the Danish architects. It was mentioned time and again, how the form of the designed objects should inconspicuously stand aside to point the attention towards the using experience. This is part of the rhetorical topos we investigate, and it was initially turned against the cult of the artistic individual shown in many art nouveau style objects, called Skønvirke in Denmark. Although being a general, modernist objection, the polemic stance continued to be central among the Danish functionalists. Henningsen repeats this critique on a redesign of the Copenhagen trams in 1930, in the article The Tram as Work of Art. Notes on Type and Taste, Art and Fashion. In his eyes, the result didn't stand back as a neutral object of use – as the old trams designed by Knud V. Engelhardt – but highlighted the new designers' fingerprint on the tram. He



uses this example to stress the ideal of the good everyday object.

The good object becomes quotidian and informal in its appearance. No one will be thinking of "art" or "personality" when gazing upon it, but of naturalness. Nonetheless, there is normally a huge effort and a solemn understanding of the task, and a personality, who would rather make sacrifices than compromises, behind the typical object.¹⁷

The designer is then only truly an artist, when he or she avoids making an artful object but pays service to the optimal form of purpose only. The tram is just another sad case of modernist designers making aware of themselves through a forced, artistic inventiveness. According to this line of thought, you wouldn't succeed in designing anonymous objects, an ideal of the Bauhaus as well, if you made conspicuous items.

The subtitle of this article also indicates another source of inspiration for this argument, the German Werkbund, as Henningsen was discussing the standardised type-product as a key to the challenges of taste, art and fashion in many of his writings these years. The Danish reception of Werkbund was moulded not only by the publications of the Swedish art historian Gregor Paulsson, but also through

several touring exhibitions. The Danish art historian Vilhelm Wanscher¹⁸ made a comment about the Werkbund exhibition at *Den Frie Udstilling* in Copenhagen in 1918:

The more our phantasy delves into the study of the real things and their proper relation to the whole, the more we rejoice over the *ones, who are artists in the right way* [...]. We have not developed far in the understanding of this in our country. The Germans have proceeded further; for this exhibition, however, they seem rather to have send us quasi-art than real things.¹⁹

This early quotation both enhance the idea of the 'real things' as authentic, if they fit in through their purpose alone, and the idea of the true artist paying service to society by giving new objects their proper, cultural form only. But Wanscher also adds another reoccurring verdict: That the Germans might deliver the crucial ideas of the time. but not the right examples. It was the returning issue in Henningsen's critique of the international modernists. He did share all their basic ideas on utilising design, architecture and planning for social equality and societal progress, but thought that their often rather conspicuous proposals mislead the public and even betrayed the mission.

Embracing Propaganda

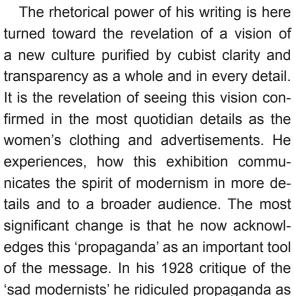
Henningsen did, however, change his rhetoric against international modernism remarkably in the year of 1930 without further notice. I have tried to reconstruct, what might have changed his mind, but he left no self-critique or revealing traces of a conversion.²⁰ Much more, his critique had been in direct contrast to the warm reception of his PH-lamps among the very same international modernists. It featured as a modernist icon in photos of modern architecture from Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat Villa to the living room of the Aaltos in the late 1920s. This confirmed, I guess, his impression of their superficial understanding of the adjusted use of lighting, as his lamp were just hung up as general light source. And they were used anywhere in this way. so his manufacturer Louis Poulsen sold well. This misunderstanding of his intentions might have led Henningsen's attention more to the constraints of communicating the proper use and understanding of the 'real thing'. In the year 1930 he could both observe the change of political tides in Germany, where the Nazi press and agitators suddenly turned their guns towards modern architecture²¹ and witness the thundering success of the interna-





Figure 4. The *PH-lamp* in the living room of Aino and Alvar Aalto in their apartment in Turku, 1927/28. Alvar Aalto Foundation.

tional style at the Stockholm Exhibition. He must have felt the need to choose sides in the more and more polarised political climate and experienced the power of propaganda for a new vision of modern society. In his Danish review of the Stockholm exhibition, he managed to both confirm his former critique and embrace modernism in the version of the Swedish chief architect, Erik Gunnar Asplund. "What, in my view, has never succeeded for Le Corbusier has here succeeded for Asplund: To free Modernism from all false, *technological* motifs like ocean liners and that kind of thing."²²





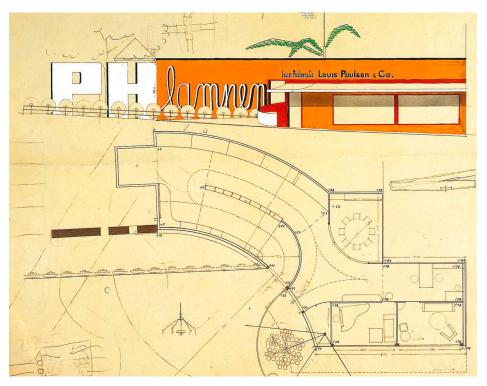
empty and defective, but now it is of value to him. In his review he maintains that the pavilions of the exhibition do not represent lasting solutions for everyday use. Their value is propaganda for a new society, an egalitarian culture, and the challenge will still be to turn the style into the everyday frames of housing.

No good housing should be exactly as these buildings, for they are ideal exhibition buildings. In this way, however, they are making propaganda for a new understanding of thing. Let us hope that the inevitable effect, which will result of the exhibition, may lead away from and beyond the direct, worthless imitation and towards a solution of the tasks of the everyday on their conditions, as precise as the task of the sunny celebration day is solved here.²³

His reasoning might be a bit murky to follow here, but his mission was from now on to point out everywhere this new spirit became visible, in society, in fashion as well as in display windows.

The cubists created a wholly natural, modern ornamentation, which has now spread to almost every furniture dealer ("Funkis") and every window decorator. [...] They replaced the precious and rare with the sharp, the precise and the decent.²⁴

In his own advertisements the PH-lamps were also turned more into design icons





than type forms, as both the lamps and the commercial tools were now part of the propaganda for the new, equalitarian and emancipatory spirit of modernism. His earlier advertisements in *Kritisk Revy* were quite innovative in themselves, but it was surely difficult to tell or picture the qualities of non-defective lighting, as fig. 3 might show. In the

same year as the Stockholm exhibition, he made an exhibition pavilion in the style of the Bauhäusler Herbert Bayer displaying his own initials, PH, as the brand of his lamps. So much for the sacrifice of the true artist to produce the anonymous type! And the lamps themselves were used in very different ways, than they were designed to – both to light up



the product name and to form the showpiece of an elderflower-like installation at the roof made by white and green lamps. This was very far from only presenting the lamp as a modest tool for everyday use and rather celebrated the lamp as a commercial icon as we know it from more recent examples of brand spaces. On the other hand, the merging of all artistic means to reach a comprehensive effect, a total design, was part of the artistic and cultural ideal of the time, the Gesamtkunstwerk.²⁵

The commercial artists of the Werkbund also piled up products or their designed packages in spectacular formations for display windows.²⁶ In this sense Henningsen might have thought of his installation as a likewise celebration of the mass-manufactured type-product, the cornerstone of a new industrial culture. He had made such a display window setting with chocolate boxes in 1926, and he had often expressed a keen interest in advertisement art in Kritisk Revy. The pavilion from 1930, however, went far beyond any earlier displays or advertisements and clearly embraced the propaganda values, he experienced and praised at the Stockholm Exhibition. It was made for an

exhibition in Tivoli, which also fits perfectly with his new understanding of 'solving the task of the sunny celebration day', the festive propaganda for a bright new egalitarian society. Of course, it was a commercial venue, but at the same time an effort of cultural and political propaganda of liberal progress supported by modernist design, architecture and technology that he felt urgent in the year of 1930.²⁷ While his positive understanding of advertisement art in the spirit of Werkbund went far back, his sudden accept of propaganda was a radical shift, as it was regarded as superficial in the professional discourse on art and design he was part of.

The discourse on advertisement and propaganda itself, however, shifted around 1930. At the *Nordic Advertisement Congress* in Copenhagen in 1931 the broad range of speakers, including the Danish Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning, head of the Social Democratic government, all agreed in the societal role of advertisement and propaganda to educate consumers and citizens to spend their money to the benefit of the national economics and support the domestic workers' employment. The international crisis after the 1929 Wall Street Crack called for

strong medicine to rise sales again, as a mutual interest of organised capitalism and the budding Nordic welfare states. In his opening address the Prime Minister declared:

Advertisement has to build on an optimistic basis. It has to bring confidence in that it can help. It must give the development a light tone, which can bring the doubtful faith and the faithful confidence in that a sound and real effort also bring results.²⁸

In his new praise of a mainstream modernist style, called 'funkis' after the Swedish popular term, Henningsen in fact turned to a more pragmatic position than Walter Gropius himself. In the same year 1930 Gropius expressed his concern of, how the Bauhaus ideas were reduced a mere Bauhaus Style copied in any products and graphic layout. Now he was worried that the efforts of the school were copied as just fashionable forms at a consumer market without deeper understanding of the ideas and ideals for a better society.

The goal of the Bauhaus is exactly no style, no system, dogma or canon, no recipe and no model! It stays alive as long as it does not stick to the form, but instead seeks behind the ephemeral form to the very fluidum of life!²⁹

This *rappelle à l'ordre* of the now former Bauhaus director to a moralistic rhetoric of design



was also provoked by the basic failure of the school in getting an income from business contract on their prototypes. Only the lamp designs and later wallpapers secured financial support to the school.30 The normative discourse on style was highly complex during the early modernism, as the term 'style' could either refer to superficial, formal traits as criticised in eclecticism or art nouveau or to a deeper order of appropriate form mirroring the spirit of modern times.31 Annoyed by the many rip offs in tubular steel furniture and graphic use of sans serif fonts without substantial understandings Gropius needed a position statement, where he insisted on the deeper strategies of spatial organisation, transparency, flexibility and dynamics as the real contributions of the Bauhaus. 32 This was also the vision Henningsen experienced and praised in Stockholm.

The Art of Promoting Everyday Objects

In this way polemics, discourses and position statements played a huge role in the continuous negotiations on which role Bauhaus had as inspiration or parallel to the developments in Danish design. All shared the same general ideals of affordable, well-designed every-





Figure 6. Three brushes by Hans Prehn, a nail brush, a bathing brush and a bathtub brush. from Erik Herløw, *Gode Ting til Hverdagsbrug* (Copenhagen: Schønberg 1949, 78).

day objects and a well-planned modern society, but positions and rhetoric changed with professional and political conditions in Germany as well as in Scandinavia. The mutual challenge was, how to promote the modern way of life through the minimalist and modest objects. At the Bauhaus the whole profile and events of the school were developed as a platform for this – to the annoyance of critics. The Stockholm Exhibition offered a similar platform, which Henningsen and many others in the Nordic countries used. In Denmark the Cabinetmakers' Exhibitions developed into a similar platform with good media attention and support by a broad network of professional and trade organisations.³³ This network in Denmark joined forces with similar networks in the other Nordic countries to promote Scandinavian Design abroad through exhibitions, awards and publications. Externally they made conspicuous displays of the design in shows and photography, and internally they confirmed each other in the initial ideal of the modest, inconspicuous toollike utensil for everyday use, like the text by Steen Eiler Rasmussen discussion above.

His Royal Academy colleague, Erik Herløw, had published an entire book on *Good Objects*

for Everyday Use in 1949, where all parts of everyday life got attention with advices for the right acquisitions ranging from the door sign over the kitchen and bathroom to sports and travel. It unfolds this whole thinking about modest objects and show very basic items, indeed. But it also shows, as in image 6, how the most trivial things as brushes can appear in conspicuous display with dramatic lighting and rich shadows on a seemingly tactile, rustic background. Later, with the authority of being the first Danish professor of Industrial Design, he explained the paradox once more:

Art is not at all to make things look extraordinary or conspicuous, but on the contrary to contribute to explain us that this thing is something we need and which we can make use of with the same obviousness, as when we make use of all the known things, which have already got their definite form, and which in natural ways have taken their places in our surroundings and in our everyday.³⁴

If we want to evaluate the familiarity between the Bauhaus and Nordic Design historically, we need to dig into many constraints, developments and negotiations, which have moulded the basic ideals and transformed the modernist idiom along the way. Seen through a historical lens of promotion the photo from Fritz Hansen, fig. 1, makes sense. It shows the Kaiser Idell -lamp series as a recently acquired icon into the Republic of Fritz Hansen in a conspicuous installation of white versions highlighting the form variations and the singular red one. Their curved, organic shapes get here a familiarity with the 25 years younger Arne Jacobsen chairs in a paradoxal setting, where the exquisite products display their subtle, iconic form in a casual way, like a snapshot with a mug of tea left on the pages of an open book and a mess of power cords, inviting the consumer to leave any constraints or worries for everyday use behind.



Endnotes

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