

Flexibility. In the span between space and furniture the classroom can be addressed anew. The space can be divided along functional lines, with niches for individual work, areas for joint activities, and areas for workshops. One might imagine a cart with subject-specific materials, for example for biology or music, being wheeled onto the classroom stage in an event-like manner. The new space enables a differentiated segmentation of the class and rapid shifts to accommodate new activities. Drawing: Anders Brix.

Art and Courage In Future Furniture Design

Furniture design is a key design discipline and has also traditionally been a major asset for Danish furniture companies. Since 2008, the furniture consortium, which is based at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture, has worked to promote innovation in furniture design. In a project involving leading Danish furniture manufacturers the consortium investigates which factors promote successful products. The project demonstrates that artistic quality and courage will be crucial for future furniture design.

By Mads Nygaard Folkmann

When design research and businesses work closely together in a consortium, synergy ensues. Research receives input from the business sector, and the knowledge generated by research can benefit the business sector. A consortium can also help establish and strengthen international networks among researchers in the same field. That is also the case in the field of furniture, says Anders Brix, a professor of design at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine

Arts, School of Architecture and head of the Furniture Consortium, which provides a forum for collaboration between design researchers and businesses on innovative furniture design.

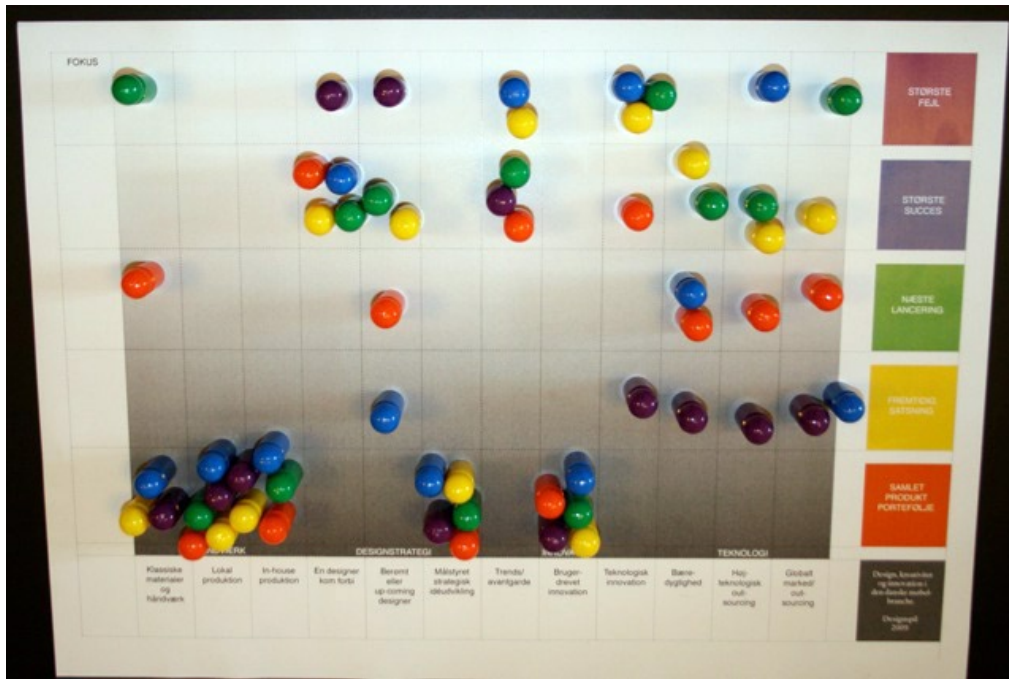
Visualising Priorities

In the project *Kreativitet og innovation i den danske møbelbranche* (Creativity and innovation in the Danish furniture business), which receives support from the Danish Centre for Design Research, the Furniture Consortium has worked with some of Denmark's leading furniture manufacturers to discover what it takes to create successful design solutions.

The consortium has worked with the companies Fritz Hansen, HAY, Erik Jørgensen, Globe Zero 4, Magnus Olesen, Engelbrechts Furniture and Fredericia Furniture. Based on both interviews and design games, Assistant Research Professor Irene Lønne and Anders Brix have explored which factors go into creating successful products.

"We have selected companies that produce furniture with a significant design content," Anders Brix explains.

"Based on specific case studies within the company – for ex-



Design priorities. Based on in-house cases the furniture companies that took part in the research project assessed the character of their product development in terms of 12 different parameters including user-driven innovation, production site, and the relationship to trends. The board visualises a particular company’s priorities in the development of furniture design. Photo: Anders Brix

ample their biggest success and their biggest failure – the companies were asked to place a number of markers on a board with 12 parameters that describe product development, for example, the degree of traditional material and the degree of innovation or sustainability. This painted a picture of the company’s priorities in the development of furniture design. We also asked them to use the board to visualise the priorities for their next launch and for their overall product portfolio,” Anders Brix explains.

“In our experience, the visualisation on the board complements the interview. The visualisation makes it clear what is at stake for the companies, and what their priorities are,” says Anders Brix.

A Feel For Design

Working with the companies offered insights into their approach to design.

“We have defined a set of questions that focus on the perception of design in the companies that work with design on a high level – and on the way they approach it,” says Anders Brix.

“One conclusion we’ve reached is that they think like designers.

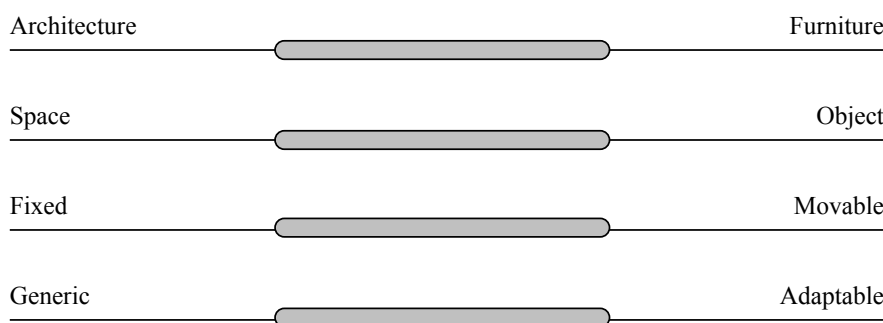
Naturally, certain strategic considerations about product type and market positioning always play into the development process as well, as do considerations about marketing. But at the same time, we see that ultimately, the assessment of artistic quality is the key factor in determining whether or not a product is realised.”

Thus, the study also points to courage as a key factor in the development of high-level design furniture.

“What’s interesting is that, of course, the companies want to make sure-fire products; yet, the high level in the companies we studied stems from their courage to trust their artistic assessment of the design. In a sense, the sure-fire quality is achieved through the courage to abandon the formulaic, analytical approach to determining the best decision,” says Anders Brix.

The analysis also offers important input for the approach to design in the educational programmes.

“The analysis offers a number of arguments that sure-fire design solutions – apart from strategy and marketing concerns that



blurred edges and enriched interactions

New design opportunities. In the space in between the customary perceptions of architecture and furniture, space and object, fixed and movable, and generic and adaptable, new opportunities can arise where space and furniture interact as part of one flexible whole. Model: Anders Brix & Nicolai de Gier

also have to be addressed – rely very much on a holistic feel for design,” says Anders Brix. “Thus, the analysis can be used to pinpoint what we need to address in design education.”

The Cultural Context of Furniture

Anders Brix points out that the analysis also shows that furniture today has become culture-driven because it enters into a culturally oriented discussion.

“Especially when furniture enters the international design scene – and the design scene really is international today – we see how it’s presented in a theatrical or filmic manner. In addition to its role as objects, the furniture enters a cultural landscape where its orientation is affected by the other furniture present in the landscape, its own possibilities as culture-bearing products, and the possibilities of the other furniture.”

“Therefore, in our analysis we apply relevant theory about design idioms to facilitate an understanding of the way in which the furniture creates meaning and becomes a culture-bearer,” Anders Brix explains.

Furniture and Space as a Whole

A key point for the Furniture Consortium is to view furniture design in relation to the space that the furniture enters into, as the relationship between furniture and space is currently undergoing profound changes.

“Our cultural habits, activities and social structures are changing, which gives rise to a need for new, flexible environments,” says Anders Brix.

“That is true, for example, in schools, where we need multi-functional spaces that can handle different activities taking place simultaneously, and which can quickly be adapted to match new needs. And it’s true in hospitals, in the home, and in conference and meeting rooms. Therefore, we seek to develop new methods to get away from viewing the space as static and the furniture as dynamic, instead seeing the furniture as elements in a flexible whole. Furniture should not be considered in isolation but as plastic objects that mediate the relationship between the human body and the physical space.”

Anders Brix and Nikolai de Gier, an associate professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture, participated in a conference arranged by Cumulus, the International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media. Here, they gave a presentation on spatial conceptions with the purpose of presenting their current research as well as recruiting members for a new network.

“We have begun to assemble a working group under Cumulus,” says Anders Brix.

“That will let us initiate more activities in the long term. The synergy generated through contact with other researchers will allow us to develop and refine the concepts of future furniture design as an integrated part of a space that is open and flexible to change.”

The Furniture Consortium is based at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture and headed by Professor Anders Brix. The consortium was founded in 2008. The project Kreativitet og innovation i den danske møbelbranche (Creativity and innovation in the Danish furniture industry) receives support from the Danish Centre for Design Research.

See the articles: *Consortiums Open Doors*, Mind Design #26, and *Research Promotes Innovation In the Danish Furniture Industry*, Mind Design #11.

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DANISH CENTRE FOR DESIGN RESEARCH

The Danish Centre for Design Research DCDR comprises the design researchers at the Aarhus School of Architecture, The Danish Design School, Designskolen Kolding and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture. The DCDR aims to contribute to establishing a strong design research environment in Denmark and to strengthen the exchange of knowledge about design research and facilitate the identification of potential areas of collaboration for researchers, schools and enterprises, on a national as well as an international level.

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