Design Research Webzine

MIND DESIGN

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Designers as Interpreters in Co-Creation Processes

Previously, technology was a main driver of innovation in companies. But with increasing globalisation and technological advances, future innovation in companies will also be driven by other factors, and design will become a key competitive parameter for many companies, says Eskild Hansen, who is a member of the board for the Danish Design Council and head of Cisco Consumer Products' European Design Center. Both he and Associate Professor Jørgen Rasmussen, head of the Department of Design at the Aarhus School of Architecture, see designers playing a key role in interpreting user responses and input in co-creation processes, where companies create value together with the users.

By Irene Houstrup

Eskild Hansen, who is a member of the board for the Danish Design Council and head of Cisco Consumer Products' European Design Center, has no doubt that design will come to play a major role in innovation in many companies. At Cisco, a global manufacturer of network solutions and consumer electronics, design has a central position in the organisation.

Design Takes Centre Stage in Future Innovation

"In consumer electronics, for example, which is one of Cisco's business areas, technology is no longer the only competitive parameter; design also plays a major role. Ten years ago, electronics companies were competing on features, that is, what was going to be the next killer application, like the built-in camera and thermometer in mobile phones, etc. Today, we are competing more on the overall concept – target group, user friendliness, design and functions. Technology is still important, but other processes are also involved in driving innovation now, and in the future, design will come to play a larger role," says Eskild Hansen.

Co-creation as a Driver of Innovation

He points to the international study New Nature of Innovation, which was carried out on behalf of the OECD by FORA, the Division for Research and Analysis of the Danish Enterprise and Construction Authority together with the Finnish Ministry of

This router from Linksys by Cisco is an example of a product where the main emphasis is not on technical features, but where the development process unfolded in a close dialogue between technology and design. Unlike many other routers, this router does not have an external antenna. In addition to the beautiful industrial design the design team addressed the overall product experience from sale, installation, and design to the use of intuitive software to manage one's entire home network in an easy and visual approach. Thus, the whole experience is designed with the consumer in mind.
Photo: Cisco

Employment and the Economy. The study identifies four new innovation drivers for companies, including co-creating value with customers and tapping knowledge from users. And in methods based on user interaction, for example in development processes, the role as an interpreter of consumer input is crucial, says Eskild Hansen.

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"Designers have the professional insight and experience with synthesis thinking that make them skilled interpreters and thus key participants in co-creation processes. They have the ability to place consumers' responses and input into a context and grasp the larger picture in the process. They are able to understand and communicate the users' needs to the companies," he says and adds, "Designers often work with tasks such as generating ideas, visualising data, developing concepts and establishing scenarios – all key elements in user-driven processes. Furthermore, designers often use interdisciplinary methods, since in development projects they often work with, say, engineers, researchers and sales and marketing specialists, and this interdisciplinary approach is essential in co-creation."

New Demands – on Companies and on Design Education

With design as a new competitive parameter, companies are facing new demands, says Eskild Hansen.

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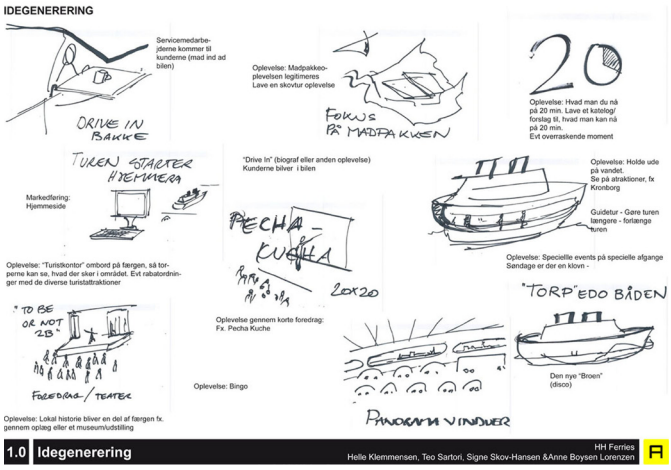
According to Eskild Hansen, this new development also places new demands on the designers' competences in the future. "It is essential to strengthen the basic competences, the designers' professional profile. Designers also need to be able to adopt an international mindset and work in interdisciplinary settings, and they should gain experience in working with companies," he points out.

Integrating Research, Education and Business

Jørgen Rasmussen, associate professor and head of the Department of Design at the Aarhus School of Architecture, agrees and underscores the importance of establishing a research basis for the design education programmes.

"The integration of research, education and business is crucial if we are to realise the innovation potential inherent in the design field," says Jørgen Rasmussen. As an example he mentions a user-focused project which the Department of Design at the Aarhus School of Architecture is involved in. The research project, AUTO, addresses user inclusion in relation to business development in companies. In the project, the students are actively involved in the process along with the participating companies and thus also involved in research. Thus, the project becomes a learning experience for the students and helps integrate research in educational activities. At the same time, there is a transfer of knowledge and experience to the participating companies, as they learn about design processes and the resulting outcomes of the process.



Department of Design at the Aarhus School of Architecture is involved in the research project AUTO – Active User Topologies – which is headed by the Danish Technological Institute. The AUTO project is about involving users to facilitate companies' business development. In a workshop with five companies, design students have developed concepts to enable companies to alter their business model in order to offer the solutions that their customers are demanding. For example, students have developed a concept on behalf of Scandlines to alter the company's value proposition from transportation to experience; here expressed in a poster. *Illustration: Helle Klemmensen, Teo Sartori, Signe Skov-Hansen, and Anne Boysen Lorenzen.*

"This produces a very fruitful flow with a build-up of generalisable knowledge that is transferred to the educational programmes and to the companies. The result is a build-up of research, the students gain relevant knowledge and insight, and the companies are introduced to new knowledge and new ways of thinking. I see this integration as a landmark for future educational institutions to aim for," he says.

Research Supports Design

Like Eskild Hansen, Jørgen Rasmussen believes that design can play a key role in innovation processes, both in companies and in society at large: "In co-creation processes, for example, design offers a natural meeting place for technology, business thinking, and human values," he says and adds, "In the design process there is an exploration of background, context, user needs and implementation options in relation to the company as well as the consumer. Additionally, the design process links this with a goal for the process and specific visions of the future, which offers genuinely useful, communicable solution models. This applies not only to challenges related to form but also to strategic and organisational challenges. Here, designers have a holistic understanding and work with visual tools, which lets them create images that are capable of handling complexity and hence useful in a strategic context."

Jørgen Rasmussen points out that design research facilitates this process, among other things by generating knowledge and sharing this knowledge with research institutions, educational institutions and businesses.

Link to New Nature of Innovation, which was carried out on behalf of the OECD by FORA, the Division for Research and Analysis of the Danish Enterprise and Construction Authority together with the Finnish Ministry of Employment and the Economy: www.newnatureofinnovation.org

Cisco's Design Center with Eskild Hansen on the far right side. Eskild Hansen graduated as a designer from The Danish Design School and is the head of Cisco's European Design Center, which is located in Denmark. Cisco's European Design Center has a staff of ten designers and one researcher who work exclusively with Cisco's design processes and design methods. "We are headed somewhere we've never been before, so it's important for us to examine our own processes in order to gather knowledge and continue to develop and update our processes," says Eskild Hansen.
Photo: Cisco

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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Mind Design, DCDR Webzine is published once a month and features articles and interviews about current Danish and international design research. Mind Design aims to present design research and research findings from researcher to researcher as well as from researchers to design practitioners in general. The webzine is free of charge. Please see www.dcdr.dk/uk/minddesign.

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