

Cutting and pasting old tunes with a little bit of beat box is not what we're aiming for

Conversation between Markus Degerman, Oscar Narud and Tomek Rygalik

Markus Degerman: The project Rooted Design for Routed living deals with questions on how to root design locally and I will of course have to start asking you what you find interesting with this as a starting point for a design process.

Tomek Rygalik: I think that the notion of a locally rooted design is at the same time both interesting and not interesting at all. On one hand there is a lot of things that is impossible to tell where they have been made with out having a look at a tag hidden somewhere and in many cases people seem to care less and less about the place of origin. But, it is on the other hand a characteristic that can create stronger relationships to the user by connecting something to time and space. Rootedness could in this sense, and this is what I find important within this project, be used as a powerful tool to create this quality.

Oscar Narud: For me, I think it presents an exciting chance to pick up on the essence of an area or the people that inhabit it. The 'rootedness' as such can come from a number of factors, ranging from the geographical aspects or local traditions through to e.g. industry on various levels found in a specific area. As an end result this factor might only be visible in a mere detail or it could act as a starting point only and fade off of as the project progresses. On the other hand it could also be something very tailored for a given site. How one chooses to draw from this source of inspiration and knowledge is less important to me but I think the fact that an object grew out of something specific is an interesting starting point. This lends an identity and a story to the object that I find most of the everyday products we surround ourselves with lack, or at least don't communicate.

MD: Is it not a risk when working with an aim to root the design within a local context that it could end with just the typical clichés and stereotypes and if so how to avoid it?

TR: Well, we live in a culture where the phenomenon with sampling has since long become deeply rooted as one method of producing new cultural expressions like for example music or design (speaking about rootedness). And it is of course a risk to treat the task in this project in a similar manner, i.e. that you just look for the most obvious characteristics and try to create a witty collage that functions as a one-liner. I am not saying that it has to end that way when working in such manner but the risk is certainly there and I think it is important to take the notion of rooting the design a bit further.

ON: Of course there is a danger of this happening but I think it requires some clever interpretation of how you decide to draw from your context. The challenge is not to recreate or force 'tradition' into a project for the sake of it but to carefully select elements or draw inspiration that might lend itself to a *new* design. Tomek mentions 'sampling' in terms of music which I find a witty comparison; for me it only stands out if you also introduce something new into the mix. Cutting and pasting old tunes with a little bit of beat box chucked in for good measure is not what we're aiming for. The 'old' has to give value and enhance the new or vice versa.

MD: Tomek, you mentioned something about that it is important to have a broad or expanded understanding of what rooted design could imply and I therefore wondering what this sort of understanding implies to you and what your strategies in bringing the result further than just witty one-liner collages?

TR: I think the key when it comes to creating good and lasting furniture is to have a long term perspective on your practice, both looking back but also looking forward. In order to do so you need to get an understanding of the cultural processes that has shaped the things that we surround ourselves with and you also need to understand your position as a designer with in this system. It is a little bit like being in a relay where you at some point take on and do your part and then later someone else will continue.

MD: I guess that this implies a humbleness of the idea on coming up with overall and ideal solutions, instead it sounds like you have a deeper interest in developing processes. How have you been trying

to structure the process of this project?

TR: I often like to kick start the process with working hands on to get something more physical done and then spend time on reflection and analyse. This is important because you need to start somewhere but you also need to consider your work and develop it and I believe that the process gets more creative if you do the work in this order rather than the other way around.

MD: The Nordic Artists' Centre (nkd) and a-i-r laboratory programme at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle are two residency centres that, as you know, in many aspects are each other's opposites and the idea with the project is of course to consider these local characteristics. How do you think this is being reflected in the works?

ON: The two art centres are indeed almost the opposite when it comes to the architecture of the spaces, how they are used and notably the centre's geographical surroundings. In one place you have close to unlimited space and tranquil surroundings whilst the other is situated in a capital city and falls under the restrictions that naturally apply to more densely populated areas in terms of space but also offers on a vast amount of input within easy access. My understanding so far has been that the designers approach is slightly split. Some are tackling the space issues in Warsaw whilst others are relishing the opportunity to develop larger, more site specific projects in Norway. However I think everyone has also adapted to the idea of developing products that address actions more than specific spaces hence creating products that traverse the architecture of the Centres but still tackle the scenarios of being an artist in residence.

TR: I agree about that but you can also say that the centres have a lot of similarities, not at least as being residency programs with a focus on contemporary art. At the moment I would also say that it seems like the designers started looking into design solutions on the specific needs that could be found at the two centres and that they, with this as a point of departure, then developed ideas that can be implemented on a more general level. This would then also suggest that the interests among the designers in this sense has not been so much on being site specific but rather cultural specific in relation to the phenomenon of A-I-R programs.

MD: The designers that are involved in the project also have different backgrounds and therefore perhaps their approaches on how to deal with the subject also differentiate. Norway and Poland are, for example, countries that are very diverse when it comes to furniture production. Poland has a lot of furniture producers but the possibilities for industrial production in Norway are very limited. After a couple of common working periods is there similarities or differences on how to relate would you say are there something that you anyway would say has turned out to be similarities between them in terms of solutions for the spaces?

ON: I think the adaptability towards the task in hand is something everyone has managed really well. More than dissimilarities based on nationality it is however apparent that we come from slightly different backgrounds, be it schools, teachers our experiences and influences and we have different approaches on how to go about reaching an end result. I think the fact that we have a variety of approaches to 'design' within our group ranging from industrial design to architecture, fine arts and product design has proved both helpful and inspiring and we have been able to draw upon each other's knowledge which has been very valuable.

MD: It is not always an easy task as a project leader to create a situation that makes it possible to take advantage of working with a group where the individuals involved can inspire and help each other. How have you been working to establish a fruitful social situation within the group?

TR: Equally important as the workshops and meetings where the group have been discussing and done practical I think it is crucial to establish a social situation where work, discussions, hand In addition to all directly work related activities we have been living, travelling, cooking, skiing, jogging, partying, swimming together. Will come up with new things and get new ideas when you look for them on unlikely places, you need to expose yourself.

ON: I think this has been the easiest part of the project and this task has practically taken care of itself. Through having the chance to actually spend proper time at the respective centres, we have been together for periods of time up to three weeks, there's has been many chances

to socialize and work under less formal circumstances. That we have got to know each other well also has opened up for fruitful conversation and a less formal exchange of thoughts and ideas surrounding the work! Another factor that has worked well

MD: What are your expectations with the outcome of the project?

TR: Hopefully we will see some things going into production, some things will have their permanent place and use at the centres and some will be starting points for other future works or serve as suggestions on possibilities. However I what I am hoping for is that the designers can develop their work to become something that would be beyond an answer to the most obvious, or let's say, literal task that has been asked to them. What I am hoping on are things that would have been impossible to make without the research and process that we have been through. It is things that would also surprise the designers themselves since it would be different from what they are usually working on.

ON: I'm hoping we can manage to create products that give something special back to the spaces and the artists who will be using them. This can come through subtle hints or features but I'm hoping that the work somehow manages to communicate the project in a good way and benefits from the research put into it. If we can achieve this I think we could have a nice little collection come out of it. Hopefully some of the work might also go further and gain interest from manufacturers and galleries alike.

February 2010