

40 Years Anniversary Address

on the founding of Nordic Forum, Oslo 1983,

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It is such a pleasure for me to be here and see that Nordic Forum is so much alive, even if or perhaps because it was started and still is a society, without a bureaucratic construction, but which now is professionally run. At the beginning back in 1983, we were only a very small group of researchers studying design history. It was not really seen as an independent topic that was interdisciplinary.

The aim was to try to establish better contact between design historians in the Nordic countries. Many of us felt isolated within what was then not really appreciated field within art history. When in 1975 I became Ass. Professor at Copenhagen University, I was told not to lecture in design history. It was Fredrik Wildhagen who in the beginning of 1980s took the initiative.

He was then head of the institute for theory and history at the design school in Oslo. I had written a book on Danish decorative art, and he contacted me in Copenhagen. I did not know him, but he was very enthusiastic and convincing, so we quickly planned to have a preparatory meeting. We made up a list with participants from design and art museums as well as cultural museums, universities, and design schools. The preparatory meeting took place at Voksenåsen here in Oslo. He also contacted Ass. Professor in Architecture, Lars Stackell from Gothenburg University, so that different institutions were represented in this first, self-appointed board. Both Lars and Fredrik have passed away. Fredrik in 1992, Lars in 2017. Until Fredrik's death our small group - we had no competitors - had a frequent dialog via telephone. It was uncomplicated.

We felt first and foremost a need for stressing that design in this northern part of Europe was not heavily dependent on what was going on in central Europe and Britain, but that in the 20th century applied art and design had developed in the Nordic countries, and it was Nordic design more than art which were known outside Scandinavia.

At the inaugurating meeting representatives from different museums as well as architectural institutions, were represented. After the meeting in Oslo, we started planning the first seminar which took place in Copenhagen in 1985. We were then only a small group attending the conferences, but from then on we held a meeting approximately every second year, trying to find topics of interest for all the Nordic design historians. The first conference in Copenhagen in 1985 was *Nordic functionalism 1925-1950*. The papers were published the following year- in Scandinavian, as we could all the understand each other's languages. Already in 1986, the next Estrid Ericson-symposium was at Hässelby Palace in Stockholm; the topic was *Design as language 1950-1970*. The topic in 1991 in Copenhagen was "the art and design museums and their collecting industrial design". I have forgotten the topics in Gothenborg and Bergen, but in Helsinki in 1988 the topic was the *Nordic Exhibition in 1888*.

Meeting colleagues was then as now a very important issue, as we often felt lonely working with this not well appreciated art field. The papers were afterwards published in small editions of booklets, without a publisher, without distribution.

I had for some years been the editor of *Hafnia*, the journal of art history at Copenhagen University, where articles on design history was not welcome - like with the other art historical journals in Scandinavia. Like with my own research, it was a kind of frustration that made me start Scandinavian Journal of Design History. Design history was in Denmark and also in the other Nordic countries as you know then viewed as a minor not to say inferior field of art. The aim with the meetings and the journal was also to fight the art historical hierarchy. What also then and afterwards has been an inspiring irritation was the general opinion that Nordic and especially Danish design was dependent on international trends. Nordic design was then as now an important export field, known and possible to buy in many countries. But until then most publications were published in one of the Nordic languages, and that was a problem if it should be included in international research.

In 1990 I decided to try to establish a journal with articles written by Nordic researchers on whatever topic within our field they worked with, and by non-Scandinavians, if the topic had relation to Nordic design

history. The language should be English. In 1991 the first volume of *Scandinavian Journal of Design History* was published. Naturally it demanded a lot of work, daily work throughout the year. Fredrik Wildhagen was meant to be review editor, but after his sudden death, I just continued with the help of my Nordic colleagues. Danish foundations and Ericson's Foundation supported with the economy and a Danish publisher, and a British publisher took hand of printing and distribution. But after 15 years of practically daily work with the journal, I wanted more time for my own research, and I could find no-one to take over, so it stopped.

We still do not have a journal for Nordic design history and theory, but we are working to solve the problem. What is necessary for my publisher, who is interested, is to secure economy for some years and a broader Nordic network not only to museum and university bookshops, but not least to publishers to secure distribution in the Nordic countries and a professional network within design research to count on. I hope the last will not be a problem thanks to the Forum. Still there are many topics that ask for being examined, such as pre-20th century design, not least is there still so much to do in the 19th century, where nationalism made the artists look to other styles than those that still constitute the traditional art historical hierarchy. Nordic design history still also needs to inquire into possible connections or inspirations from one of the Nordic countries to the other. Are there connections or perhaps a wish of not aiming at the same? Here there are still many questions to be asked.

Within the coming year we will see if we succeed in starting the journal again, but this time with Line and Anders at the head of it.