

Leena Svinhufvud , Kärt Summatavet

Design Museum Helsinki, Finland

Estonian Association of Designers, Estonia

Oral Histories of Designers: Rethinking the historical, theoretical and international foundations of Finnish design

Contemporary theories in design history underline the value of information produced within the profession. Oral history has become a significant methodology for understanding creative practitioners and also the missing history of art education. Oral history has suggested new methods for research also for design history (Sandino, 2013; Oral Histories and Design: Objects and Subjects, 2006).

Despite the eminent national and international recognition of Finnish design the historical development of this post-WWII success story and the hagiography spun around it has been surprisingly little exposed to research. Even less the educational system, ideologies and models that laid the foundation for the professional practice. Our research project uses oral history as a means to reconstruct design history from "beyond" and to study the professional, ideological and philosophical groundings of Finnish design basing on interviews of designers.

In a set of interviews conducted in 2013-14 in the Aalto University, Helsinki we focused on processes how educational programmes have developed and individual designer identities were constructed (Summatavet & Svinhufvud, 2013). The interviews of designers who started their studies in late 1960s and early 1970s problematize the construction of a designer identity, motifs and missions. We claim, that there is a collective Finnish concept and understanding of a modern designer identity that is built upon common education (one school) and especially on the aesthetic principles of composition. Through the art subjects and especially the mandatory subject of composition (general composition) a universal set of design rules were planted, a basis whereupon specific professional tuition was added. We propose that this gave a general platform and understanding to students, future professionals.