

# The Creation of a Regional Brand: Scandinavian Design

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# 13 The creation of a regional brand

## Scandinavian Design

*Mads Mordhorst*

### Introduction

How are narratives of the Nordic Model constructed, circulated, and with what impact? This chapter addresses these questions by examining ‘Scandinavian Design’ using Sweden and Denmark with IKEA and Danish Modern specifically as representative of this design concept. It follows two circulation processes. The first is the narrative constructions of the model between ‘the outer non Nordic world’ – mainly the United States – and the Nordic region. The second process is how they were recirculated in and among these two Nordic nations.

I argue that ‘Scandinavian Design’ as a concept did not originate in the Nordic states but was ‘invented’ in the United States. It was constructed and filled with meaning that to a greater extent addressed target groups and ideas in North America rather than the Nordic region itself (Marklund and Petersen, 2013). When the concept was imported to the Nordic countries afterward, it was circulated and transformed through new symbolic meanings linked to the individual national Nordic narratives and was then returned or re-exported as brands with new meanings. This is thus a process of co-production where symbolic values of the nations are linked to design products and manufactures and add value to both the nation and producers. For example, IKEA is organically linked to the values of Sweden.

Contrary to the narratives of the Nordic model, then, which claim a common Nordic unity and identity, the national narratives were not created in harmony but often in contrast to each other as part of the individual nation-building processes going back to the nineteenth century. In Denmark, it is linked to ideas like small-scale production, anti-industrialization, process, and craft (Mordhorst, 2014). In Sweden, on the other hand, it is linked to price, and industrial and large-scale production.

The chapter combines a narrative approach with a branding perspective. A brand is created through images and narratives that differentiate one from one’s competitors, with the effect of making the product attractive in the eyes of the consumer or target groups (American Marketing Organization, 2015). In the branding literature there is a tendency to conflate the strategic

marketing efforts of branding and the brand. In praxis most brands do not emerge as the result of strategic branding efforts but as unintended side effects. It is logical to perceive nations as brands, but their brand images have not been created through branding campaigns; they are an outcome of centuries of nation-building processes (Mordhorst, 2019). One example is the nineteenth-century national romantic construction of the Viking, which today has transformed into an icon that is often used to brand Nordic countries, as well as products from the region. In contrast to Hansen (2010), who has analyzed the processes as strategic co-branding between Danish design and the Danish nation, this chapter claims that the concepts of ‘Scandinavian-’ and ‘Democratic Design’ mainly emerge as unintended effects in the circulation and then become brands that in the long run have positive outcomes for companies and the nation. This can be analyzed through the circulation of narratives. Narratives fill out the brand with semiotic signs and connotations, but as with the distinction between brands and branding, there can be a difference between the sender of the narrative and the performative effects the narratives take on when they are received and circulated.

I have chosen chairs as the analytical objects and exhibitions as the central contextual framing of the narratives. Chairs are seen as the icons of furniture design and have played a key role in the Scandinavian modern design tradition (Dybdahl, 2017: 28; Olesen, 2018: 12). I have more explicitly chosen a Danish and a Swedish chair, both of which are framed as ‘iconic’ due to their long histories and statuses in exhibitions in Denmark and Sweden today. The chairs are the Danish Wegner ‘Model 503’ or ‘The Round Chair,’ later dubbed by the Americans as ‘The Chair’ from 1949 (Dickson, 2017: 80) and the Swedish IKEA chair ‘Poem’ from 1976, renamed to the more Swedish sounding ‘Pöeng’ in 1992 (Budds, 2016).

The analytical research fields are exhibitions and museums. These are sites where the chairs are transformed from furniture to exhibits and linked to broader cultural contexts. Exhibitions are combinations of exhibits, the exhibition texts, the design of the exhibition, and the museum housing the exhibition. In combination, this creates the ‘material exhibition.’ But exhibitions are also sites where different stakeholders and networks contribute to the exhibitions with their own interpretations. You have the senders like curators, designers, craftsmen, their industries, museums, and exhibition halls. You also have the receivers like visitors, tourists, and consumers, and finally, you have the communicators such as design experts and lifestyle magazine reviewers. All take part in creating, transforming, and circulating the narratives with different purposes. Concepts like ‘Nordic,’ ‘Scandinavian Design,’ and ‘Democratic Design’ are thus abstractions, which get their meaning through ongoing circulations and exchanges between different contexts and shareholders.

This chapter follows this process in four different exhibitions. In order to track the origin for the idea of Scandinavian Design, I begin with the World’s fairs held in the United States from Philadelphia in 1876 to New York in 1939. After that I turn to the exhibition ‘Design in Scandinavia’ that traveled

around North America between 1954 and 1957. I then shift to two contemporary exhibitions in Denmark and Sweden. The first is ‘The Danish Chair – An international affair,’ which opened as a permanent exhibition at the ‘Design Museum Danmark’ in the fall of 2016. The other is the IKEA museum in Sweden, which opened in the summer of 2016. The analytical focus in the reading of these exhibitions is to see how the narratives that were created in the United States are reconstructed and ‘nationalized’ today in Sweden and Denmark.

The focus is thus on the narrative construction of the concepts and does not claim to be a contribution to the design history of Scandinavia but relies on others’ research. The Danish historian Per H. Hansen has extensively analyzed the Danish furniture industry in Denmark and how it strategically has been branded and narrated in Denmark as well as in the United States (Hansen, 2010; Hansen, 2018). Jeff Werner has done the same from a Swedish perspective (Werner, 2008). The Norwegian art historian Ingeborg Glambeek has analyzed Nordic design from an external perspective but with a more national and European perspective (Galmbeek, 1997).

## **Scandinavian Design**

The Norwegian art historian Kjetil Fallan has made a distinction between Scandinavian Design as an actor’s category, where it describes how actors in different cultural and historical contexts ascribe meaning to concepts, and Scandinavian design as an analytical category, being a concept that describes a specific empirical phenomenon (Fallan, 2012: 2). This chapter follows the first understanding, focusing on the concept of Scandinavian Design as socially constructed.

From the 1950s onward, Scandinavian Design has been a brand that has been profitable for Scandinavian companies in branches like fashion, furniture, architecture, and interior design. In the last decades, it has also been used as co-branding new branches like the New Nordic Cuisine, and Nordic welfare services. Checking Wikipedia – a source that might be problematic to use in regard to facts, but a good source if you try to trace a public narrative – you can read:

**Scandinavian design** is a design movement characterized by simplicity, minimalism and functionality that emerged in the 1950s in the five Nordic countries of- Finland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark... The ideological background was the emergence of a particular Scandinavian form of social democracy in the 1950s.... Many emphasize the democratic design ideals that were a central theme of the movement and are reflected in the rhetoric surrounding contemporary Scandinavian and international design.

(Wikipedia, 2017)

Wikipedia thus places the concept in time and space. It has its origins in the Nordic countries and the time is the 1950s, and a ‘from below’ perspective

is indicated when Scandinavian Design is characterized as an active social movement. This transforms the concept from a geographical and regional indicator to semiotic signifier for common values like simplicity, minimalism, and functionality, and the concepts of 'democracy' and 'democratic design.' It is these more diffuse and slippery concepts of values which are in the center of analysis in particularly how 'democratic' emerges as a connotation for Scandinavian design and transforms it into a concept of its own by becoming 'Democratic Design.'

### **North America: the origin of Scandinavian democratic design**

Americans were the drivers in establishing Scandinavian Design and associating it with democracy. It was a process dating back to the late nineteenth century and culminated in the 1950s with the exhibition 'Design in Scandinavia.' Before the WW II, the development was centered on Sweden, alongside a broader narrative of the authentic and exotic north. After the war, Scandinavian Design became more associated with Denmark and a democratic vision building on general concepts and similarity between the United States and Scandinavia rather than on difference.

### **Sweden as the exotic north**

From the late nineteenth century, Sweden was more active than any of the other Nordic countries in promoting their national art and design in the United States. A vehicle for advancing this was the World's fairs – Philadelphia 1876, Minneapolis 1887, Chicago 1893, St Louis 1904, San Francisco 1915, Chicago 1933, and New York 1939 – where Sweden was represented with national pavilions including special exhibitions of art, design, and craft. None of the other Nordic countries had a similar representation.

The Swedish art historian Jeff Werner has thoroughly analyzed the art and craft exhibitions at the World's fairs from a Swedish perspective (Werner, 2008). I will focus on how the exhibitions were received and reviewed in the US media and how through this Sweden became the incarnation of Scandinavian images and values.

A recurrent theme in the reviews is the making of Sweden as exotic and authentic. At the first World's fairs, this was done through national-romantic narratives portraying Sweden as a historically traditional rural society celebrating the peasants and peasant life (Norton, 1877: 87). In later exhibitions, this authenticity was supplemented with narratives of the north as having a specific climate, light, and race that differentiated the Swedes and the region from others. As a reviewer of the World's fair exhibition in Chicago 1893 wrote in the *Evening Post*:

As we move further north among the nations of Europe the art become fresher, brighter and perhaps more original. Something of the northern winds and lights, blue skies and waters, clear atmospheres comes to us,

and we begin to feel that far from the madding crowd of Paris there may be a new race with a new art.

To emphasize this unique and exotic character the review concluded: 'The only hope for the northern painting lies in remaining northern painting and nothing else. Cosmopolitanism would utterly ruin it' (Werner, 2008: 105). The national concept of Sweden is thus translated into the broader categories of 'northern' (climate) and 'race' as a positive and unique brand. Nordicness as a racial category became a trope in subsequent years so much so that Nordic connoted the blond race (Lunde, 2012), often with the use of the romantic conceptions of the Vikings. In a review from the fair in St Louis, 1904 you could read:

It is as if the Swedes could not restrain themselves, and had been under a sort of necessity of filling the art cup to the very brim until it should run over. A sort of violence and fury impel them; common language will not suffice; they want to shout and hurrah; they want to cover leagues of canvas; they want to invent pigments more brilliant than any ever existed. All this is truly northern; truly Scandinavian, and a little barbaric; but is it tremendous! Ponderous! Grand!

(Werner, 2008: 113)

Swedes are not just Swedes then; they incarnated the wild Vikings and were thus 'truly' northern and Scandinavian and able to express those values in their art and design. The use of the Viking mythology was useful in bridging past and present and the regional global.

The images served as brand driver and as such were excellent in prompting Swedish art and design. In 1927, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (MoMA) held for the first time ever in the United States a one-country exhibition of industrial art. At the opening of the exhibition, the museum's president Robert W. de Forest elaborated on how Sweden was both a monarchy and a democracy and that this is 'notable in the character of its exhibits, and in their installation. It is democratic in that the objects displayed, beautiful as many of them are, are as rule not costly but are appropriate even to humble homes' (Werner, 2008: 255). The same narrative was to be found in the exhibition catalog's introduction: 'The quality of this decorativeness derives partly from the deeply rooted democratic tradition in Northern peasant work of simple masses.' (Werner, 2008: 256). The introduction was written by the main curator at the museum, Joseph Brick, and links Sweden and the rest of the Nordic region to the concept of democracy connoted with affordability, humble homes and to the masses. The exhibition was a success and continued as a traveling exhibition throughout the United States and Canada.

Sweden strategically used this successful outcome as part of marketing their own fair, The Stockholm Exhibition 1930, where the architecture of the pavilions was modern and functionalistic, just as the exhibited Swedish

furniture branded Sweden as a modern society and Swedish design as 'Swedish Modern' (Glambek, 1997: 80ff). An additional marketing tactic was to invite 14 selected American journalists for free to the exhibition and an excursion around Sweden. This again created positive articles in the American media. One of the invited journalists was Marquis Child who in 1936 published *Sweden: The Middle Way* (see also Chapter 4 by Carl Marklund and Chapter 5 by Andreas Hellenes), which was perhaps the most influential contribution to the positive image of Sweden and Scandinavia, particularly his comments on the cooperative movement and housing policies, in the United States (Child, 1936).

That these elements for a part of the American public had become linked with the concept of Swedish Design became evident when Sweden, as a part of the preparation to the World's fair in New York, 1939, surveyed Americans on their perception of Sweden. When asked what they associated with 'modern' and 'Sweden,' a majority answered modern furniture, cooperative societies, and housing policy. This fitted the theme of the fair, which celebrated the 150 years anniversary of America and had the theme 'Building the World of Tomorrow.' The world of tomorrow was illustrated by the central part of the exhibition, the utopian city 'Democracity' (Glambek, 1997: 108). There was in other words an almost perfect fit between the New York fair and Sweden as incarnating Nordic and Scandinavian values as modern and democratic.

Jeff Werner has shown that the concepts of 'Middle Way' and 'Middle Class' merged with the concept of Swedish Modern during the 1930s, and that this was central to the export success for Swedish Modern in that decade:

Swedish design could in the interwar time benefit from being rewritten to a middle way between reactionary conservatism and radical modernism. The design was at the same time narrated into a discourse on social welfare and beautiful everyday goods for all.

(Werner, 2008: 3)

### **Scandinavian design as democratic hominess**

Positive images of Sweden as a model society and utopia were changed by WW II, however, particularly due to Swedish politics of neutrality during the war that in the United States was seen as acquiescence to Germany. This created an opening in the US design market for Danish Design. The Danes saw an opportunity to take over the former Swedish position and tried to persuade MoMA to host an exhibition on Danish modern furniture along the lines of the earlier Swedish Exhibition in 1927. Danish Design did get attention in America in the postwar period; there was an interest in Wegner and his chair design which, in 1950, was praised in a full page review in the magazine *Interiors*, and it was after this that it got the name



'The Chair' (Olesen, 2018: 330). Despite this emerging fascination, however, MoMA's answer to the Danes was that it was not interested in an exhibition that only focused on Danish design, but perhaps a broader one that had Scandinavia as its theme would have greater appeal. The Danes were annoyed by the suggestion of a common Scandinavian exhibition. They were interested in promoting their own products and found that they could easily fill out an exhibition themselves. MoMA, on the other hand, pursued the idea of a common Scandinavian exhibition, and its director of Industrial Design, Edgar Kaufmann Jr., went on a tour in 1948 to Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland to investigate the possibilities for such an exhibition. Kaufmann was thrilled by the design, but in the end, he did not find that there was enough quality for an exhibition at this time.

In Scandinavia, MoMA's and Kaufmann's pressure spiked an idea of a cooperation between the Nordic countries. If the Americans had an idea of a common Scandinavian design style and tradition, then why not address this and start exporting it (Glambek, 1997: 118)? By the end of 1951, a plan emerged at a meeting in Copenhagen with participation of the national associations of craft, applied art, and design from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The idea was to join forces and establish a traveling exhibition that would tour through North America. This objective was endorsed by other influential people in America such as the editor for the interior design magazine *House Beautiful*, Elizabeth Gorden, who pushed for a Scandinavian design exhibition in America (Guldborg, 2011), and during the 1950s, the terms Scandinavian Modern/Scandinavian Design subsequently replaced the national connotations as the central concept (Werner, 2008: 344).

These Nordic countries had different opinions on the content and framing of the exhibition. The Swedish delegation focused on the commercial perspective in a common exhibition, while the Danish delegation emphasized 'the importance of showing the differences in the design cultures of the Nordic countries' (Guldborg, 2011: 48). Nevertheless, agreement was achieved and 'Design in Scandinavia' (Remlov, 1954) opened with over 700 exhibits. Subsidized by the Nordic governments, the exhibition traveled from 1954 to 1957 to 24 cities around the United States and Canada and was visited by 658,264 people (Guldborg, 2011). The impetus behind the exhibition was to boost the export of the individual national design branches under the umbrella of Scandinavian Design, but this was just a part of the strategy. All four countries supplemented it with cultural events, marketing campaigns, promotions for national goods, and propaganda for their nations and ways of living.

'Design in Scandinavia' contributed to filling out the concept of Scandinavian Design as democratic. In the exhibition catalogue, Scandinavian Design was narrated as an expression of the core of Scandinavian history, values, and identity, while differences resulting for example from the long tradition of warfare between the Nordic nations, as well as the image of the wild Viking, were toned down (Remlov, 1954: 11–20). American reviews of



'Design in Scandinavia' were positive. In a narrative perspective, it had a plot that stressed a familiarity between America and Scandinavia on the level of fundamental values, and at the same time, it made the Scandinavian Design goods expressions of those values more ideal and authentic. A review in the *New York Times* found that the high quality of Scandinavian Design was rooted in history, and the 'inspiration for their design is based on centuries of high standards of living' which is what one can see in the 'sophistication and high degree of culture that characterize the best of Scandinavia's craftsmen and architects' (Hansen, 2018: 263). The lifestyle magazine *House Beautiful's* review argued: 'Why are the home furnishings so well designed, and so full of meaning to us? Because they are so well designed and so meaningful for the Scandinavians themselves.' And to stress the link and the natural connection of meaningfulness between Scandinavia and the United States, the review stressed that this was because 'we are both deeply democratic people. Home is their centre – and people are the centre of their homes. Their design is human and warm. Therefore, it is natural, national, and universal.' (Glambek, 1997: 128)

There was also a narrative link to the political climate in the 1950s where the discourse on the international scale, framed by the Cold War and anti-communism, built on a dichotomy between the good democratic West and the totalitarian East. This was not the only way that democracy as a concept was filled out, as Hansen sums up the reviews of 'Design in Scandinavia':

It is clear that the discussions and reviews in the American journals and newspapers for the most parts were based on a contraposition, between the rationalized USA and the Scandinavian countries, where the good craftsmanship, and focus on quality, function, simplicity and durability still were valuable elements.

(Hansen, 2010: 88)

The design had elements that made it easy to create a narrative that bridged tradition and uniqueness with a focus on elements like wood being the dominant material and craftsmanship with modernity, rationalization, and simplicity. In the American narrative on Scandinavian Design, there is an implicit critic of American society and of 'corporate and industrial America.' In contrast to Scandinavia, this corporate America is unable to produce democratic, warm, honest, and human design. Further, it could be argued that the journals and newspapers that talked so favorably about Scandinavian Design mainly attracted upper-middle class academics and liberals living in cities on the East- and West Coast. They could thus use the narrative of Scandinavian Design as a democratic showcase to signify Scandinavia as an alternative democratic society.

If we compare the narrative of Scandinavian Design in the 1950s and the Cold War with the narrative of Swedish Modern in the 1930s in the aftermath of the Great Depression, a change has taken place. The class references

and focus on the masses and affordability in the latter had been replaced by a narrative that focused more on the common history, craftsmanship, and aesthetic metaphors. ‘Sweden the Middle way’ had become ‘Scandinavia the Third way,’ a less political but still a very positive and idealistic narrative (Werner, 2008: 365). Instead of Scandinavian as once linked to the Swedish narrative, it had become an independent category. Seen as narrative the new Scandinavian story fitted better with the Danish national narrative than with the Swedish. This contributes to explain why Danish Modern replaced Swedish Modern in the American market.

From a branding perspective ‘Design in Scandinavia’ was a success that reached beyond the immediate commercial profits. What was launched as marketing and export campaigns for a specific industry ended up as a narrative of modern Scandinavia and Scandinavian values as an ideal model for the good life. To what degree this had any background in the reality of the Scandinavian countries at that time was not important for either the Scandinavian or the American audience. One reason why the exhibition became so successful was that Scandinavians did not need to construct, circulate, and market the narrative. It was constructed and narrated by Americans themselves and used as a positive magic mirror for national identity purposes. In this way, differences in style, design, and competition among the Scandinavian countries were placed in the shadow of the Pan-Scandinavian narrative.

### **Democratic design in Denmark: art, craft, and small scale**

In 2016 ‘The Danish Chair – An international affair’ opened as a permanent exhibition at the Design Museum Denmark (Olesen, 2018). The exhibition underlines the notion of Danish Design being linked to chairs, and indeed, Danish chairs have been well represented in the museum. For years, the Design Museum had the nickname ‘The Chair Museum.’

Historically this has its background in the fact that the museum played an active role in the creation and dissemination of the narrative of modern Danish furniture design. The museum has as part of its purpose to promote and brand the Danish design industry. From 1939 to 1966, the Design Museum hosted the annual ‘Exhibitions of hand-made furniture by members of the cabinet-makers guild of Copenhagen.’ As Head of Research at the museum Lars Dybdal expresses it:

Throughout the epoch [1927–69] the Design Museum Denmark was the central stage for the taste and status for the cabinet-makers’ annual exhibition... With a glance the audience or the reviewer of the press could get an overview of the results of the current trends between the furniture designing architects with their ambitious aesthetic energies and the joiner with their high work ethic and professional skills.

(Dybdal, 2017: 61)

Even though the industry or designers have not been active in the creation of the ‘The Danish Chair’ exhibition, the Design Museum still sees itself as a part of the design network and has the promotion of Danish Design as a part of its purpose (Olesen, 2018).

The introduction to the exhibition is shown in a separate room and as with the rest of the exhibition it is minimalistic. The second part of the short introduction text starts with:

In 1949, in Design Museum Danmark, the furniture designer, Hans J. Wegner presented the chair, which American journalists were to dub ‘the chair.’ It became the symbol of a giant Danish export adventure and a national brand known as Danish Design.

‘The chair’ is placed right next to the text in an unassembled version, which allows visitors to see every part of it. Hence, ‘The Chair’ is placed as the nexus of the exhibition and thus becomes its icon, and it is also the first chair mentioned and described in the book that serves as the exhibition catalog (Olesen, 2018: 10–11).

The main exhibition consists of the display of 110 chairs. Each chair has an individual display case and is presented more as art works than as furniture or as cultural-historical exhibits. However, text and information about the chairs can be found in posters, which can be pulled out off the side of the display cases.

A kind of contextualization is presented at the end of both sides of the exhibition hall where a video loop can be seen. Most of the time it shows cabinetmakers working on the chairs almost as if they are artisans working on an artwork, making it visible that the chairs are handcrafted. Other video clip parts show designers drafting the chairs.

In the main exhibition hall, ‘The Chair’ is placed in the center of the exhibition. When you pull out the poster, nearly half of it is devoted to a picture of John F. Kennedy sitting in ‘The Chair.’ The text explains that:

The Chair became a symbol of Western democracy, because it was used in the first televised election debate in the United States between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960.

The picture of Kennedy sitting in ‘The Chair’ has been used extensively in the marketing of Danish Design. The semiotic link between the Danish chair, Kennedy, and democracy is a powerful cocktail. It was used as part of a narrative of a democracy represented by Kennedy and the growing upper-middle class in the United States, wherein Nixon represented the undemocratic villain (Figure 13.1).

In Denmark, the link between intellectualism, democracy, and ‘The Chair’ is still active. For example, do the Danish Prime Minister receive prominent guests in a room furnished with ‘The Chair.’ Consequently,



*Figure 13.1* Photo of ‘The Chair.’

*Source:* Wegner 1949 ‘The Chair’ © Designmuseum Denmark.

Clinton, Bush, and Obama, among others, have all sat in ‘The Chair’ when visiting Denmark.

The Kennedy narrative is itself a development of the larger story of why Danish modern furniture is perceived as democratic. This is a national Danish narrative that is linked to Danish history, and it was developed before the international breakthrough of Scandinavian- and Danish Design in the 1950s. This narrative is represented in the video loops in the exhibition with the carpenters and designers. As Per H. Hansen has argued, it emerged in the interwar years when a network of designers and cabinet-makers joined together in creating a new design style (Hansen, 2018). They had to distinguish themselves from the international design styles like the Bauhaus and functionalism on one side, and traditional Danish furniture on the other. In other words, Danish Design represented a compromise between national history, international outlook, and traditional and new design. With regard to the traditional parts, the designers focused on ‘natural’ materials like wood and leather and emphasized the role of craftsmanship

in the production. The new democratic furniture was handmade all the way through and used the design to build on values like simplicity, honesty, and timelessness. Perhaps as one of the most important elements, they were created in a ‘democratic’ process between the cabinetmaker and the designer, who were the heroes of the narrative.

This very much resonated with the broader Danish national narrative that had been at the center of the Danish nation-building process since the last half of the nineteenth century, building on the loss of Norway and Schleswig-Holstein. It was one that focused on smallness, historical roots, bottom-up processes, and anti-industrialism (Mordhorst, 2014). These were the values that filled out the concept of democracy in the Danish narrative (Figure 13.2).

As part of the narrative, those values had a negative counterpart that served as the villain – industrial production. Specifically, Bauhaus designers used ‘unnatural’ materials like plastic and metal, and unlike the Danish focus on craftsmanship and production in small workshops, you had large-scale production: ‘Wegner’s design offered a new modernist alternative to cold, rational modernism from Bauhaus. With its craft tradition, sensuous qualities and organic and more humanistic expression Danish Modern...softened the sharp, objective, cool modernism that Bauhaus represented’ (Exhibition text Design Museum Denmark, Bauhaus 100 year, 2018).

As in most narratives, there are inconsistencies in the Danish Design narrative. One is that the high price did not fit with the idea of equality in an



*Figure 13.2* Photo of ‘exhibition hall.’

Source: ‘The Danish Chair – An international affair’ © Designmuseum Denmark.

economic sense. Most of the furniture was – and is – expensive and luxurious. For example, the cheapest version of ‘The Chair’ costs 4.700 USD. That makes it rather unlikely for ordinary Danish citizens to furnish their homes with ‘Danish Democratic Design.’ The price also distinguishes the Danish version of democratic from the Swedish present version of democratic design, which is exhibited at the IKEA Museum.

### **Democratic design in Sweden: IKEA**

In June 2016, the ‘IKEA Museum’ (IKEA, 2016) opened in Älmhult, Sweden, a small village and birthplace of IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad. The museum is situated in the same building which housed the first IKEA store that opened in 1958. The exhibition is divided into three themes: ‘Our Roots,’ ‘Our Story,’ and ‘Your Stories.’

The design and style are strikingly different from the Design Museum in Copenhagen. It displays the ‘IKEA style’ and signals that it addresses ordinary people with ordinary materials. These are typical for IKEA: for example, many of the display cases and exhibition floors are made of chip-board and plywood. But as is often the case with IKEA, the exhibitions are thought through in all details. Instead of placing the furniture as artworks, most of them are, just as in IKEA warehouses, made up as room interiors, and by this the lived life in the homes of families becomes the object of the IKEA museum.

The first part of the exhibition ‘Our Roots’ takes place on the ground floor. The narrative and plot expressed is very explicit. It is Sweden’s development from a poor and undeveloped nation to a modern social democratic welfare state, with IKEA being a driver in this transformation. The introductory text with the title ‘Our Roots’ starts with the sentence:

At first poor and undeveloped, then, starting from the 1930s a country determined to become a modern egalitarian society. Two very different periods that in their own ways shaped the IKEA we know today.

The first part of the period is described as a hard time: ‘living in Sweden was a struggle, constantly battling hunger and poverty.’ The values of solidarity, entrepreneurship, and austerity are stressed in the texts: ‘they saved and scrimped, patched and mended. Nothing went to waste. Everything that could be reused got a new life. Only those who were thrifty and inventive succeeded.’

These were the values and virtues that helped to transform Sweden from a poor agricultural country to a modern industrial society, which is the heading of another text: ‘How would Sweden become a better country to live in? The Social Democratic government of the 1930s had a plan: It was time to sweep away “Dirty Sweden” with rationally constructed housing, improved hygiene and enlightened citizens. It was time to build

“The People’s home.” These homes would be furnished with IKEA, thus linking the materialization of the Swedish welfare society’s values with IKEA through this narrative.

This is a typical Swedish narrative (Rodell, 2014), where the industrialization of Sweden is the driver. The villain is old poor agricultural Sweden which kept the Swedish people in poverty. The heroes are a unity of the Social Democrats and ‘genius entrepreneurs’ like Ingvar Kamprad, who used his entrepreneurial skills for the Swedish nation. The receiver is the Swedish people, and what made it into the everyday life of reality is IKEA and their democratically designed furniture.

The concept of democratic design is elaborated in the next part of the exhibition ‘Our Story.’ While ‘Our Roots’ was placed on the ground floor, ‘Our Story’ is placed on the brighter first floor of the old warehouse. On the ceiling, there is a moving band with posters of hundreds of the most famous pieces of IKEA furniture from different times. Below the photo of the furniture, there is a short description in nearly the same format as the price tag you would see in the stores, with bold letters for the name and the price highlighted. So in contrast to the Danish narrative and exhibition, the rolling band reminds visitors that the furniture is not ‘timeless’ but an expression of its time; it provides association to an assembly line in an industrial plant, and the price tag shows that IKEA furniture is cheap because it is mass-produced.

The displayed interiors are typical for the different decades of IKEA’s history. Some are even glued to the ceiling, perhaps as a gimmick. In contrast to ‘Our Roots,’ this part of the exhibition uses humor as a part of the exhibition language, reminding the visitor that IKEA is also about fun and play.

One example of this is ‘Our Icons’ consisting of four items. One display case looks empty at first glance, but then the spectator can see a small exhibit: ‘The Allen key’ that is used to assemble IKEA furniture. So instead of placing one of their iconic pieces of furniture, they place a small tool. This is followed by the text: ‘The Allen key is a democratic little invention. It doesn’t care if you’re all thumbs or a master carpenter. All it asks of you is a little hand power and a few minutes of your time. The pay-off is your very own, self-bassembled pieces of IKEA furniture at a self-assembled price.’ The Allen key is thus made democratic because it makes the consumer a co-producer, which saves money for the consumer. This is again in sharp contrast to the Danish narrative, where the producers were craftspeople who through an artesian process made the furniture democratic.

The display case besides the Allen key has the title ‘Hip hip hooray!’ and exhibits a small model of the armchair Poäng that, according to the text, was designed to last a lifetime and now celebrates its 40th anniversary. Poäng is exhibited at different places in the exhibition, where different aspects of its success are highlighted. At the poster on the moving band, it is the low price of 55 USD – meaning that you can buy 85 Poäng chairs for the same price as one ‘The Chair’ (Figure 13.3).





Figure 13.3 Photo of 'Poäng.'

Source: Poäng © Inter IKEA Systems B.V.

The link between the IKEA version of democratic design and affordability is also a key issue in the largest exhibition text in 'Our Story' placed in the center of the hall and entitled *Democratic Design*. The text says: 'Well designed, functional, good quality, sustainably sourced and manufactured, and truly affordable. Five elements working together in the same product. This is democratic design.'

At this spot, museum guides on a bookable tour relay a short narrative about the IKEA version of how democratic design entered into IKEA as a core value: 'Ingvar Kamprad had been at the furniture fair in Milan, and seen the Scandinavian furniture. He came back frustrated and said 'Everybody can design a beautiful sofa to 50,000 Kroner [5,800 USD], but to make a well-designed sofa of good quality to the tenths of that price that is what makes it democratic' (Figure 13.4).

This is the closest you can come to a critique of the Danish version of democratic design without mentioning Denmark explicitly, and in this way stressing that democratic furniture should be affordable for most people in a society in order to be democratic.

Today it is a central element in the IKEA brand that all the furniture has Swedish names, but just like the blue- and yellow-colored logo and



Figure 13.4 Photo of democratic design.

Source: IKEA's visual image of 'democratic design' © Inter IKEA Systems B.V.

warehouses, this is a later invention because up until 1984, IKEA's colors were ironically red and white like the colors in the Danish flag (Kristoffer-son, 2014). Paradoxically this is a part of IKEA's internationalization and globalization that produced the national Swedish narrative around IKEA. The more global IKEA has become, the focus on 'national' and Swedish has become stronger on their brand and brand narrative, and as a part of this the focus on democratic design.

### From Wegner to IKEA

We thus have two national narratives as to what constitutes 'Democratic Design' that on key issues contradict each other (Table 13.1):

The question is how can two narratives that in so many parts exclude each other be brought together in a united concept as Scandinavian democratic Design?

The Danish version of democratic design was, despite its price, an export success in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the 1970s, it began to decline. There are different explanations for this. First, the Danish modern design had not been able to renew itself. It was after all not 'timeless' and it fell out of fashion (Hansen, 2010). Other causes included the pop-cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s that changed the idea of modernity and furniture design. Together with the economic crises in the 1970s, this further put pressure on

Table 13.1 Danish and Swedish versions of democratic design

	<i>Design Museum Danish democratic design 1930–1970</i>	<i>IKEA Museum Swedish democratic design 1970 and onwards</i>
Example	‘The Chair’ Price: 30,000 DDK	Pöäng Price: 425 DDK
Production	Small scale and craft in cooperation between designers and joiners	IKEA, industrial large-scale production
Keywords why democratic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Craftsmanship</li> <li>• Quality</li> <li>• Honest material</li> <li>• Eternal design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Price</li> <li>• Quantity (cheap)</li> <li>• Environmentally responsible</li> </ul>

high-end furniture, and it became increasingly difficult for the narrative to unify the price level with the concepts of democracy and equality.

Into this void, a renewed version of the Swedish/Scandinavian narrative from the interwar years on democratic Scandinavian design made a comeback, now with the Swedish furniture company IKEA as its central player. Sweden had regained its positive connotation as representative of a middle way, balancing social welfare with capitalism. This fitted the IKEA narrative on democratic design perfectly.

Until the decline of Danish Design in the 1970s, IKEA focused on the domestic market. But in this decade, the company also began to internationalize, rapidly expanding and becoming an ongoing success. There was still a demand for ‘Scandinavian Design,’ and the IKEA narrative and price was more in line with the time, had a broader target audience, and perhaps was more in touch with the development of the general Scandinavian brand. The narrative’s correlation of the Swedish welfare state and Sweden and IKEA is one of the best examples in the world of successful co-branding between nation and company.

What happens if you make the counterfactual thought experiment and ask: could IKEA have been Danish? Denmark was in the 1950s and 1960s the frontrunner with regard to Scandinavian design, so why did IKEA not emerge in Denmark? If we look at the narratives, they are in contrast to each other at most of the key points, not just on the price issue but also on the values. The Danish narrative values ‘small’ and ‘handcraft’ while it devalues ‘big’ and ‘industry’ as evil and antidemocratic. This is in contrast to the Swedish narrative. In this perception, handcraft and small-scale production are elements that belong to the poor and negative past that Sweden was able to liberate itself from through the industrial revolution that resulted in IKEA and other large corporations like Volvo and Ericsson and made Sweden a rich welfare society. With this in mind, it would be unlikely that a company like IKEA could have emerged in Denmark because it would not have the legitimacy to brand itself as representative of Danish and democratic

values. The national narratives are performative and have become moral and cultural institutions. In this function, the narratives legitimize what is seen as ‘good,’ ‘national,’ and ‘democratic’ business and what is illegitimate and un-national business.

Are there ‘counter cases’ that falsify my argument, like a Danish ‘IKEA’ or a Swedish ‘Wegner’? A Danish counterpart to IKEA could be the Danish furniture company ‘FDB-Møbler’/Coop Furniture. It was established in 1942 as a part of the Cooperative Consumer Society in Denmark, with the purpose of producing design furniture at an affordable price for the (middle class) people (Hansen, 2014). FDB-Møbler became a huge success in the postwar decades. Their best-selling chairs were mass produced to over 800,000 copies. But despite the demand for their high-end Danish design, they were not able to transform their national success into an export success and from the middle of the 1960s a decline started in the home market. Ironically, they closed production down in 1969 – the same year as IKEA began their international expansion by opening their first store outside of Sweden in Denmark. There are different reasons for the decline of FDB, but one of the main ones is that they did not succeed in exporting their brand because it was too linked to the national Danish cooperative narrative.

Likewise, you could argue that the Swedish furniture architect Bruno Mathsson is comparable to Wegner in Denmark. In some aspects, this is true. Mathsson became internationally famous and some of his chairs were bought by MoMA both as museum exhibits and as a part of the interior design of the museum. But he differs from the Danish architects in two aspects. First, his chairs did not become a commercial export success to the United States and second, he was not narrated as part of a national movement either in America (Werner, 2008: 350–351), as had happened in Wegner’s case, or in Sweden where Mathsson was portrayed as a ‘genius entrepreneur’ (Rodell, 2014) in line with the Swedish national narrative (Mathsson, 2019). The counter cases, therefore, serve as verification of difference in the national circulation of design narratives rather than as falsification of the influence of the national narratives.

The design case study shows a process where the Nordic and Scandinavian stories are constructed outside the region and then circulated in the region and returned. While these processes can be said to have produced a brand, it would be misleading to see this as the result of branding or co-branding. Instead, they are the side effects of complex interactions. It also shows that the external construction is dominated by narratives on harmony and positive images while the internal Nordic circulation in contrast shows competition and strife between the national cultures. This has also been the historical pattern, wherein the Nordic states and nations have been created in a process where the neighboring countries have been the negative mirror and villain. This has created a region with similarities but also differences. Following this, it is difficult to see how a Nordic model could

emerge among the Nordic countries themselves. As a broad brand frame, the Nordic and Scandinavia works well because they values and narratives that are produced outside the region, that has been picked up in the Nordic countries and re-exported. This has become the Nordic brand model used brands like Nordic Lifestyle, New Nordic Cuisine, Nordic Noir, Nordic Greentech, and so on, which then again have contributed to a positive reputation of the North.

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