

“The ‘Designer’—The 11th Plague”: Design Discourse from Consumer Activism to Environmentalism in 1960s Norway

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In 1962, designers were branded as fadmongers and named the Plague itself by a Norwegian botany professor who took it upon himself to defend the duped consumer. In 1969, design students under the guidance of Victor Papanek and his Norwegian host were renovating a derelict backyard in a run-down part of Oslo in the name of environmental regeneration. These two rather remarkable, but highly dissimilar events exemplify a significant transformation in critical design discourse in Norway during the 1960s. Whereas the broader streams of design discourse at the time revolved around the disintegration of the traditional applied art movement in the aftermath of the Scandinavian Design frenzy,¹ these more radical factions sought to drive design out of its comfort zone established in the prosperous postwar period.

This article explores how the more radical components of design ideology that slowly gained momentum throughout the 1960s now and then came to the fore in the Norwegian design community. In various and not always coherent ways, petitions were made for increased attention to the social and moral responsibility of design. Nevertheless, a discernable shift in focus in the course of the decade can be identified: In the early 1960s, critical design discourse aligned with consumer activism, campaigning for product longevity and against faddishness, whereas ideas associated with ecology, resource management, and environmentalism emerged as the most pressing topics toward the end of the decade.

At the risk of slightly anticipating events, one might say that this criticism questioned what design for the *real* world would entail. The critique arose both within and outside the design profession. Some outsiders pigeon-holed design and designers as immoral minions of capitalism and catalysers of consumption. At the same time, a small but vocal group of insiders engaged in serious soul-searching, questioning established practice in the profession. One of the more interesting expressions of these radical design ideals came with the declaration from a young design educator that “We have teacups enough!”—conveying a (symbolic, if not actual) break with the applied art movement and its devotion to *more beautiful everyday goods*.

1 Kjetil Fallan, “How an Excavator Got Aesthetic Pretensions: Negotiating Design in 1960s’ Norway,” *Journal of Design History* 20:1, 43–59.

- 2 Knut Fægri, "'Designeren'—den 11. Landeplage," *Farmand* 13 (1962): 22–3.
- 3 Following the lecture, a professor of theology at the Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology reported Øverland, and he was subsequently charged with blasphemy. The trial, however—where Øverland acted as his own counsel—resulted in a full acquittal. See: Arnulf Øverland, "Kristendommen, den tiende landeplage," in Arnulf Øverland, *Tre foredrag til offentlig forargelse* (Oslo: Fram, 1933): 7–34. Øverland's essay even made it into the fictional work of fellow writers. An intriguing example is how the equally controversial author, Agnar Mykle, let the protagonist of his novel *Lasso rundt fru Luna* "reel... about a week on end in the most intense ecstasy" after having read "Kristendommen, den tiende landeplage." Agnar Mykle, *Lasso rundt fru Luna* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1954): 45.
- 4 Fægri, *Op.cit.* 23.
- 5 *Ibid.*

The Design Plague

In Spring 1962, on the pages of the business magazine *Farmand* appeared an article titled "The 'Designer'—the 11th Plague" ("'Designeren'—den 11. Landeplage").² The article was authored by Knut Fægri, a professor of botany at the University of Bergen. Both the author and the venue were thus outside the remit of the design community, but the nature of the allegations made commanded its attention nonetheless. Adding to the provocative force of Fægri's criticism was his choice of title: a paraphrase of the title of a famous and much disputed lecture given by the poet Arnulf Øverland at the Norwegian Students' Society in 1931 called "Christianity, the Tenth Plague"—an incident causing much public commotion and even ending up in court on a blasphemy charge.³

Why, then, did the botany professor consider the designer a plague? Fægri's tirade was occasioned by a personal frustration with the discontinuance in 1960 of the production of the Porsgrund Porselænsfabrik oven-to-table set *Glohane*, designed by Tias Eckhoff in 1955 (see Figure 1). The decision ended possibilities of supplementary purchases, and Fægri poured out his wrath in several directions: (1) toward consumers, for "not appreciating the difference between buying a service and buying a summer hat";⁴ (2) toward the manufacturers, for constructing consumption ("If they can get the summer hat mentality sufficiently inculcated, one might reach the point where people scrap their tableware once a year in order to follow the 'designer' fashion. Then we'll be talking sales.");⁵ and (3) toward the media for being completely uncritical and full of awe in relations with the designers and thus failing the mission to guide and counsel the public on matters of consumerism.

However, as the title clearly announces, Fægri's primary target was the designers—who he consistently referred to as "designers," effectively exploiting the derogatory potential of the quotation marks:

Figure 1

Dish w/lid from the oven-to-table range "Glohane" manufactured by Porsgrund Porselænsfabrik (1955), designed by Tias Eckhoff. Courtesy of the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. Photographer Anne Hansteen Jarre.



The task of the “designer” is to produce new forms, and the worst thing that could possibly happen to him is that he produces a truly good, permanent form: what is he then to do the rest of his life? ... The “designers” must demonstrate that they are indispensable: exit *Glohane*, damn the customers, they are always without rights. And next time, the customers say damn Norwegian crockery, let us stick to foreign standard designs, those we can at least find again.⁶

The crux of Fægri’s criticism was thus that the designers were self-asserting, egocentric, and cunning opportunists, turning everything they laid their hands on into ephemeral fashion products, while also being utterly servile to and uncritical of the manufacturers’ immoral and irresponsible perpetual novelty pursuit. The flaw that could be—and indeed was—observed in Fægri’s argument, though, was the degree to which he empowered his enemy: He seemed to believe that the designer made the decision to discontinue the manufacture of a product—if not directly then at least indirectly, by way of new designs making existing products (appear) obsolete.

Both the former sales manager of Porsgrund Porselænsfabrik, Viggo B. Heirung,⁷ and the director, Jacob Aall Møller, felt compelled to lecture the botanist on the realities of industrial manufacture: The discontinuance of *Glohane*, they both proclaimed, had nothing to do with the product’s design, nor did it result from new designs taking its place; instead, it was a question of manufacturing capacity.⁸ In response, Fægri simply adjusted his aim slightly and claimed that these explanations did not change anything. The manufacturers had to appreciate that launching a product entailed responsibilities and that discountenances and short production lives was a deceitful and immoral practice.⁹ Aall Møller concurred with Fægri that the perpetual quest for novelty was a nuisance but blamed it on a frivolous and irresponsible public. The designer just did his job the best he could, concluded the director, with a plea: “Professor Fægri, let the designer off the hook!”¹⁰

Even the designer—*Glohane*’s designer, Tias Eckhoff, at that—agreed that we have ...been bestowed with a disturbing quest for novelty. The porcelain follows the ever more rapid changes in fashions; the models’ production lives seem to be getting shorter and shorter. The manufacturers must sell and the pressure for novelties rises as the product must be adapted to the broad market. The result is that one often ends up in quaintness. Both form and decor become mannered.¹¹

Although Eckhoff had left his position as design manager at Porsgrund in 1959, it seems he agreed with his former colleagues Heirung and Aall Møller that this deplorable situation could not be blamed on manufacturers or designers: Washing their hands of

6 Ibid., 22.

7 Heirung was sales manager at Porsgrund from 1954 to 1959, when he moved back to his native Trondheim to manage the tableware retail company Andreas Moe, selling *Glohane* and other Porsgrund products. One of his tasks at Porsgrund had been to come up with names for all the factory’s products, among them *Glohane*. Viggo B. Heirung in conversation with the author, October 14, 2005.

8 Viggo B. Heirung, “‘Designeren’—den 11. Landeplage,” *Farmand* 15, 1962, 63 and Jacob Aall Møller, “‘Designeren’—den 11. Landeplage,” *Farmand* 17 (196): 3–5. *Glohane* was not manufactured at Porsgrund Porselænsfabrik, but at the sister company A/S Sanitærporsele, maker of sanitary ware, where it had been baked between that factory’s usual production bakings of toilets and sinks to fill spare capacity. This spare capacity vanished as A/S Sanitærporsele experienced an increase in demand for its core products. Because of differences both in material and baking, the production could not be moved to Porsgrund Porselænsfabrik.

9 Knut Fægri, “Glohaner og knehøner,” *Farmand* 18 (1962): 31–2.

10 Jacob Aall Møller, “Glohaner og knehøner,” *Farmand* 20 (1962): 75.

11 Tias Eckhoff interviewed in Ragnhild Bjelke, “Vurder ikke dekoren isolert,” *Bonytt* 27 (1967): 213.

the responsibility Fægri assigned to them, they held the whimsical consumers and their uncultivated taste responsible for the development.

By this time, the criticism accusing designers of continuously supplying manufacturers with novel designs for the sake of novel designs appeared from several quarters. Fægri's accusations resembled those of other independent critics who accused designers of unscrupulously serving the profit greed of industry and commerce, designing alluring, instant garbage.¹² Perhaps more surprising was when an industry representative, the economist Alf Midtbust, who served as director of the National Federation of Furniture Manufacturers, expressed similar attitudes. As in Fægri's case, a product Midtbust wished to purchase had been discontinued—this time an armchair known as *Kaminstolen*, manufactured by Aarnæs & Hjelm and designed by Adolf Relling in 1946.¹³ As a representative of the industry, Midtbust understandably aimed elsewhere: The novelty-crazed public was an easy target for him as well. More interesting is his critique, however carefully worded, of the design community for being overly keen on experimenting. According to Midtbust, this attitude only complemented the consumers' desire for novelties and thus contributed to what he saw as a pressure on the manufacturers to constantly bring out something new.¹⁴

Returning briefly to Knut Fægri's contribution, the role of design and designers in the consumer society clearly was beginning to be questioned from several quarters, especially expressed as a concern for frivolous consumption and illegitimate novelty of design.¹⁵ Still, there is reason to suspect that Fægri's criticism represented more than a vehement disgust for fashionism and novelty craze. As a botanist, he developed a strong interest in and passion for climatic studies, ecology, resource management, and the preservation of natural resources.¹⁶ Although these dispositions were not explicit in the *Farmand* articles, we can plausibly suggest that his aversion to what he considered an increasingly ephemeral character of many products had other underpinnings as well. Indeed, if we interpret Fægri as implicitly linking consumer society and industrial design with ecology and resource management, his criticism surely becomes poignant.

As we have seen, Fægri was opposed by representatives of industry, who accused him of a poor understanding of the realities of commerce and industry, as well as of shooting the pianist. Because no designers had retorted, Arne Remlov, editor of the leading design magazine *Bonytt*, took it upon himself to speak on behalf of the profession. Remlov based his defense on the presumption that Fægri held an antiquated view of the design profession, reminding the professor that design was not just about the superficial form and color of an object. Also, the *Bonytt* editor displayed a far more positivistic attitude toward change than Fægri:

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- 12 Elias Cornell, "Lyx eller rikedom i våra hem," *Bonytt* 22 (1962): 154–6.
- 13 A curious fact is that this very chair—albeit with a slight redesign by Else and Nordahl Solheim—was reissued in 1965, although whether the decision was made based on Midtbust's "obituary" is dubious: Arne Remlov, "Vår mann i Stavanger," *Bonytt* 25 (1965): 258.
- 14 Alf Midtbust, "Nekrolog over en stol," *Bonytt* 23 (1963): 82–3 and Alf Midtbust, "Quo vadis?," *Bonytt* 24 (1964): 113. The *Bonytt* journalist Harriet Clayhills, who often portrayed herself as the consumer's advocate, also made similar arguments concerning what she claimed to be an "increasing frequency in the oscillations of the furniture fashion:" Harriet Clayhills, "Hold fast ved modellen....," *Bonytt* 24 (1964): 122.
- 15 Incidentally, this criticism was remarkably similar to the disgust the Norwegian design community a few years earlier had shown for the *styling* so prominent in American mainstream design of the 1950s: change for the sake of change, design used as commodity cosmetics. See, e.g., Thorbjørn Rygh, "Amerikansk Form," Thorvald Krohn-Hansen (ed.), *Nordenfjeldske kunstinstrimuseum—Årbok 1953* (Trondheim: Nordenfjeldske Kunstinstrimuseum, 1954) 14 and Jens von der Lippe, "Amerikansk virksomhet," *Bonytt* 14 (1954): 65.
- 16 Some of his publications may give an indication of this: Knut Fægri, "Klimahistorie og arkeologi," *Naturen* 10 (1942): 310–7; Knut Fægri, "Naturvern i mange land," *Naturen* 9 (1956): 515–31; and Knut Fægri and L. van der Pijl, *The Principles of Pollination Ecology* (Toronto: Pergamon, 1966).

Is it not ... natural and appropriate that [the designer] seeks to improve the items for which he is responsible? ... Generally one might say that reaching other results is a sign of greater knowledge, that it in other words is what we call development.¹⁷

The wheel kept on turning, Remlov argued; development was a good thing, and the designer was by no means the weak-willed marionette that Fægri claimed. On the contrary, Remlov asserted: The designer is an earnest and righteous professional with impeccable moral standards. A decent designer would never give in to modishness, but would only present designs representing genuine, uncompromised improvements.¹⁸ With the benefit of hindsight, it is tempting to speculate whether Fægri's criticism perhaps would have fallen on more fertile soil had he made a more explicit link between commodity production and ecology and resource management—a connection environmentalist critics would highlight just a few years later.

The Morality of Materials

In the meantime, a very different, but equally fascinating, take on the newfound concern for the contextual morality and responsibility of design took form as a growing propaganda for the use of indigenous materials. This message was most clearly expressed in the field of furniture design. It started out in the latter part of the 1950s as a modest critique of the proliferation of teak as the material of choice in furniture production. This early critique was based chiefly on the fear that the phenomenon resulted from the popularity of Danish furniture—the classical fear of fashion, one might say. But in the 1960s, teak was joined by other exotic types of wood (e.g., mahogany and rosewood) as targets of criticism, and now they were criticized, not for being a fad or a fashion, but for being alien, false, and extravagant in the realm of Norwegian furniture production.¹⁹

In 1965, the National Federation of Furniture Manufacturers issued a design competition for furniture in pine and birch, and the Norwegian furniture fair in Stavanger featured many of these designs, as well as other furniture in these materials.²⁰ *Bonytt* joined in and propagandized willingly and enthusiastically for the use of pine and birch, which could be found in abundance in the extensive Norwegian forests. Because these were indigenous materials, they were deemed “genuine,” “true,” “honest,” and “moral.” In other words, pine and birch were portrayed as “real” materials suitable for designing for the “real” world.²¹

In historicizing these aspects of the critical design discourse, we face a potential methodological fallacy: We must be careful not to extrapolate more recent ideas, such as sustainability and eco-design, back into the 1960s.²² Still, this caution should not preclude a considerate interpretation of the new advocacy of indigenous materials as a possible expression of a more or less articulate concern

17 Arne Remlov, “Designerens ansvar,” *Bonytt* 22 (1962): 113.

18 Ibid.

19 See, e.g., Arne Remlov, “Fra det ene til det andre...,” *Bonytt* 26 (1966): 242.

20 Arne Remlov, “Fra Stavanger møbelmesse,” *Bonytt* 25 (1965): 274–6.

21 See, e.g., Alf Midtbust, “Frem for furua,” *Bonytt* 25 (1965): 126–7; Marianne Gullowsen, “Efterlyses...,” *Bonytt* 25 (1965): 139–40; Arne Remlov, “Det lyktes—så langt,” *Bonytt* 25 (1965): 221–4; and Arne Remlov, “Vår mann i Stavanger,” *Bonytt* 25 (1965): 252–8.

22 Clive Dilnot has demonstrated that many design histories have made this mistake of lapsing into retrospective constructions of traditions of contemporary ideas: Clive Dilnot, “The State of Design History, Part II” in Victor Margolin (ed.), *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 233–50. The many problematic aspects of such a practice—constructing a genealogical history of ideas that predates their full-fledged conceptualization—are discussed, for example, in Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context—Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988): 29–67.

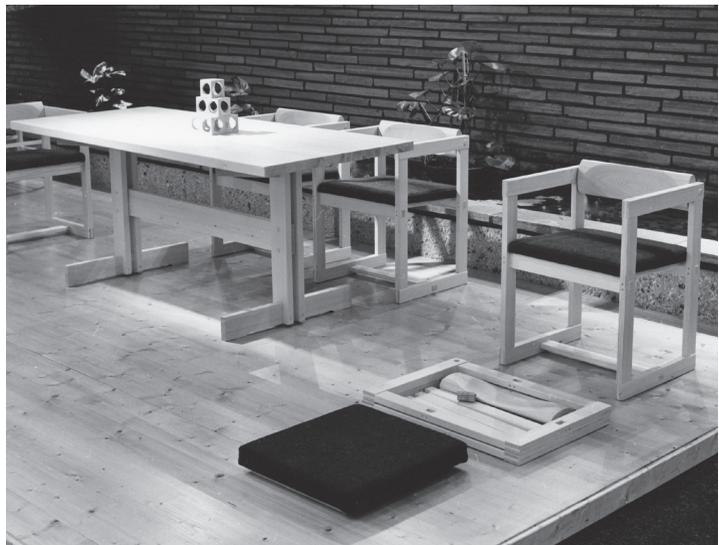
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- 23 For more on Relling and the *Siesta* chair, see Fredrik Wildhagen, *Møbeldesigneren Ingmar Relling i perspektiv* (Sykkylven: Sykkylven næringsutvikling A/S, 1991).
- 24 Liv Schjødt, "Tordenskjolds soldater," *Bonytt* 26 (1966): 10–1.

for resource management in the context of product development and design processes. This campaign for genuineness and naturalness in the product development process can be seen as a reflection of the campaign for genuineness and naturalness in the appropriation and use of products, so explicit in the consumption critique discussed above. We might say that these two campaigns made up each end of the growing concern for the contextual morality and responsibility of design.

A telling case in this connection is the third design competition organized by the Furniture Industry's Trade Council in 1965. First prize was awarded to the *Siesta* easy chair, submitted by designer Ingmar Relling and the manufacturer Vestlandske Møbelfabrikk A/S. This remarkable product has been in production ever since and is one of the biggest successes ever to emerge from the Norwegian furniture industry.²³ In her comment on the competition, *Bonytt* co-editor Liv Schjødt reticently seconded the jury's decision; her real concern, however, was with a contribution that did *not* enthruse the jury:²⁴ The interior architect and furniture designer Edvin Helseth had been commissioned by Trysil Municipal Forest District to design a furniture system intended for manufacture by various local enterprises outside the established furniture industry. The motivation was to create viable business in rural districts, thus requiring low costs of investment, production, and material, and low skill requirements. Based on this program, Helseth designed chairs and tables made up of simple, modular elements based on standard plank profiles, each requiring minimal tooling, machining, and finishing (see Figure 2). The system highlighted ease of assembly, and the material was local pine.

Thus, these features were in line with the campaign for genuineness and naturalness, expressing on the production side the contextual morality and responsibility of design. But

Figure 2
Modular system furniture in pine
manufactured by Trysil Municipal Forest
District (1965), designed by Edvin Helseth.
Courtesy of the Norwegian Design Council.



Schjødt's enthusiasm was further fueled by her assessment of the furniture's functionality and usability aspects, falling in line with the consumption side of the same discourse: robust dimensions for longevity, rounded and flexible back rest for ergonomics, adjustable parts and particular nursery versions for child friendliness, arm rests below the table top for floor space economy, and low prices for affordability.²⁵ In other words, the design was considered an attempt to create a low-impact, high-yield product—a design for the “real” world.

Although Helseth's furniture system—dubbed *Trybo*—did not impress the jury of the Furniture Industry's Trade Council design competition, it later won approval elsewhere.²⁶ The system was expanded to include a vast range of furniture types when its manufacture began in 1966, and was also incorporated into the *Trybo* prefab, modular leisure cabin designed by Helseth and his colleague, the architect Hans Østerhaug—a project that was presented to an international public on the pages of the British Council of Industrial Design's *Design* magazine.²⁷ The Norwegian Design Centre jury used much the same arguments as Liv Schjødt had done in her ode to the Helseth furniture when they awarded *Trybo* the Norwegian Design Award for 1967:

The Trybo pine furniture shows originality and independent thinking and is an exceptionally good example of product development based on strictly limited raw materials and production facilities.²⁸

This remark, combined with a commendation of the project's aspect of regional development and local industry integration, clearly indicated that this part of the industrial design community showed increased concern for the contextual morality and responsibility of design. Helseth himself explained his motivation for the project as based on a strong social vocation:

I believe ... that of greatest interest is the utility article which can be used by different persons with different needs, what I will call the social furniture, the aid ... The artifact must never become a goal in itself, but be thought of as part of a context.²⁹

Hence, Helseth portrayed his design philosophy as a way of solving “real” problems for “real” people living in the “real” world. Design should serve humans and facilitate life—not create imposing objects of desire. Helseth later became involved in a project that was far more radical in this respect, when in the early 1980s he worked with the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) on developing school furniture intended for production in Tanzania.³⁰ His revolt against what he in the 1960s saw as aestheticizing tendencies in contemporary Scandinavian furniture design made *Bonytt's* Harriet Clayhills label Helseth the *enfant terrible* of the

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- 25 Liv Schjødt, “Vi trenger hyttemøbler også!,” *Bonytt* 26 (1966): 12–3.
- 26 A very curious example of such approval is that a Dutch professor of industrial design visiting Norway bought a *Trybo* chair and included it in the model collection at Eindhoven Academy of Industrial Design and that the chair and Helseth were the subjects of an article appearing in the Benelux magazine, *Die Nieuwe*: N. N., “Norsk stol har suksess,” *Bonytt* 27 (1967): unpagged [app.] The *Trybo* furniture series was also selected for the exhibition, *Design in Scandinavia*, which toured Australia in 1968: Ulf Hård af Segerstad, *et al.* (eds.) *Design in Scandinavia* (Stockholm: Victor Pettersons Bokindustri AB, 1968): unpagged.
- 27 Alf Bøe, “Designed for leisure living,” *Design* 248 (1969): 32–4.
- 28 Alf Bøe, *Den norske Designpris de syv første år / The Norwegian Design Award its first seven years* (Oslo: Norsk Designcentrum, 1969): 52. This was the second time Helseth received the Norwegian Design Award. His module-based furnishing system for cupboards and drawer sections, *Modul 5–15*, won the 1963 edition. The jury considered it “a very praiseworthy attempt at simplifying and rationalising production, storage, and distribution.” 44.
- 29 Edvin Helseth, interviewed in Harriet Clayhills, “Bonytt-intervju om disiplin og tilpasning,” *Bonytt* 26 (1966): 260.
- 30 Knut Berg, Stephan Tschudi-Madsen, *et al.* (eds.), *Norsk kunstnerleksikon 2* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1983): 165.

design community. She depicted much Norwegian furniture design as becoming conformist, conservative, and pedantic: “But then you have the obstinate and insubordinate Edvin Helseth as a hair in the soup. He who does not want to make fine furniture.”³¹

Still, the most unconventional Norwegian furniture to see the light of day in the 1960s must have been the pieces in plastic-reinforced cardboard designed by interior architect Terje Meyer. According to Meyer, the idea was to develop furniture that would be as cheap as possible, primarily aimed at young people. The solution was not to cut corners in conventional furniture production, but to think outside the box, the young designer proclaimed. After eagerly promoting his ideas in *Bonytt* in 1967, he managed to get a manufacturer on board.³² And just as the material and concept were unconventional, so were the manufacturer and the retailer: The packaging manufacturer Strongpack A/S produced the cardboard furniture, and it was sold through the fancy boutique Bobolina in Oslo. Given that an arm-chair sold for NOK 40 (USD 7) and an easy chair for NOK 70 (USD 13), Meyer must be said to have reached his goal of making furniture “so cheap that they can be thrown away when you get tired of them.”³³ Despite the very low prices, the cardboard furniture never became a big seller, and its production was soon discontinued.

How this disposable furniture fit in to the emerging debate on environmental awareness is another story, but Meyer did become involved in this debate when, shortly after, he participated in a project for the development of an electrical van. Meyer and fellow designer Bjørn A. Larsen were hired to design the fiberglass-reinforced polyester body of this peculiar, aluminum frame vehicle developed by Einar Kjelland-Fosterud and his fellow engineers. The project was funded by the Ministry of Industry, and environmental concerns were a prime mover in the project, in addition, of course, to industrial development. Three vehicles were built at Strømmens Værksted around 1970, but series production never came about.³⁴

“We have teacups enough!”

Despite Helseth and Meyer’s involvement in pioneer projects, it was another designer who, more than any other, would explicate the emerging interest in the potential of design as social activism within the profession. Roar Høyland developed a strong passion for the contextual morality and social responsibility of design from the mid-1960s—interests he had ample opportunity to express when he joined the *Bonytt* editorial committee in 1965 and, more significantly, began teaching design methodology at the National College of Art and Design in 1968. As an indication of this disposition, he was on the Norwegian Design Centre jury that hailed Helseth’s *Trybo* furniture, discussed previously.³⁵ When interviewed by his *Bonytt* colleague Harriet Clayhills, he proclaimed with great pathos that “it is irresponsible to use design as a selling point for any given

31 Clayhills, *op.cit.*

32 Else Margrethe Engen, “Ung designer søker sin produsent,” *Bonytt* 27 (1967): 218–9.

33 N. N., “Billige pappmøbler,” *nye bonytt* 7 (1968): 33. A conventional easy chair in the lower price range cost about ten times as much. For instance, the *Siesta* chair manufactured by Vestlandske Møbelfabrikk and designed by Ingmar Relling, much applauded for its design for rational production and low shipment cost, was priced at NOK 805,- (USD 150,-) in 1968. Gerd Hennem, “Markedet: Tradisjonelt—moderne,” *nye bonytt* 10 (1968): 44.

34 Einar Kjelland-Fosterud, “Den norske ELBIL” in Øistein Bertheau and Christian Stokke (eds.), *Made in Norway? Historien om forsøk på bilproduksjon i Norge* (Oslo: Norsk Teknisk Museum, 1991): 250–5.

35 The other jury members were Tormod Alnæs, Arne Lindaas, and Kaj Franck—with Alf Bøe as secretary: Bøe, *op.cit.* 51.

36 Roar Høyland interviewed in Harriet Clayhills, “Design = Ekonomi’ og kultur,” *Bonytt* 25 (1965): 279.

sofa bed model.”³⁶ To Høyland, real design was a complex task not to be taken lightly. Social and human requirements should always be its motivation and guideline, but designers could only succeed in changing our environment and society by acknowledging that design also was a decidedly profane and worldly activity:

We must break free of regarding design as merely a drawing task. Technology and economy enter the picture, it is a question of analyses, tests and trials... The designer must, in collaboration with technicians, engineers, and economists, have a grounding on which to promote his ideas.³⁷

Høyland thus seemed to envision the designer as a figure in which pietistic morals, social responsibility and aesthetic culture joined forces with rational thought, technological know-how and business instinct. In other words, he saw the designer as a great Renaissance Man—much like a hybrid of John Calvin and Leonardo Da Vinci, slightly genetically enhanced by contribution from Karl Marx. Another important point for Høyland was to purge design of its snobbish and elitist tendencies. The designers should engage in projects aiming to solve “real” problems for “real” people living in the “real” world. The cultural and social influence of a product was proportional to its affordability, proliferation, and number and frequency of product-user interactions. Thus, improving the design of a milk carton was, according to Høyland, much more important than to design yet another beautiful and expensive chair.³⁸

This attitude can be said to have reached its zenith when Høyland in 1968 hung a poster in his classroom at the National College of Art and Design that said “We have teacups enough!”³⁹ In other words, designers had more pressing tasks at hand. This highly symbolic act may be seen as an attempt at a final showdown with the old Paulssonian idea of *more beautiful everyday goods* (*vackrare vardagsvara*), which for half a century had been such a dominant idiom in Scandinavian design.⁴⁰ The irony is that the act took place the very year the Norwegian Applied Art Association celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and the National College of Art and Design celebrated its hundred and fiftieth anniversary—a school that had been the breeding ground for the applied art movement in Norway. Two decades later, Høyland even became Rector of the school.⁴¹

While Høyland encouraged design activism and social responsibility from within the profession, similar attitudes also began to appear in design criticism authored by non-designers. The art historian and writer Gerd Hennum, who occasionally freelanced for *Bonytt*, announced a remarkably radical stand on the social and political responsibilities of design when she interviewed the young American designer, Edward Hubbard Yonkers, and titled the article, “Design—A Wealth Phenomenon in the Rich Part of the World.” Yonkers, a graduate of the Institute of Design at Illinois

37 Ibid., 278–9.

38 Ibid., 277–82.

39 Roar Høyland in conversation with the author, March 28, 2007.

40 The term was coined by the Swedish art historian Gregor Paulsson in 1919. Gregor Paulsson, *Vackrare Vardagsvara* (Stockholm: Svenska Slöjdföreningen, 1919).

41 Høyland headed the school’s metal department from 1983 to 1989 and was Rector from 1989 to 1996. In this connection, it is interesting to note that despite this quite radical stance, Høyland, too, came from the “conventional” applied art community. Not only was he a member of the *Bonytt* editorial committee from 1965—he also worked at the applied art colony PLUS in Fredrikstad (albeit in its more “industry-friendly” division, designing, for example, various plastic products) and was that institution’s art director from 1962 to 1965. Wenche Anette Johannessen, *Brukskunst-senteret PLUS—Per Tannums ønske om å etablere et designsentrum* [Master thesis] (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 2000) 88–9 and Petter Henriksen et al. (eds.), *Aschehoug og Gyldendals store norske leksikon* [3 ed.] (Oslo: Kunnskapsforlaget, (1995–9) 7, 359.

Institute of Technology, had at the time of his 1968 visit to Oslo spent two years in India trying to apply his design expertise to the fundamental problems and primary needs of a developing country.⁴² Deeply moved by the young American's commitment and devotion, Hennem wrote:

The industry to which design can be applied in the rich countries often produces products which do not fulfill the consumers' *genuine* needs, but the fictitious needs created by PR and advertisement and are necessary in order to keep the machinery of wealth going.⁴³

Hennem quoted Yonkers to the assertion that the way the economic system of the Western world exploited industrial design:

...can seem quite absurd even to a designer when seen in relation to the fundamental needs of the major part of the world's population. It is essential that we think in a global context if we are to survive.⁴⁴

That an American designer in 1968 should come to Norway preaching the gospel of design as a tool for solving real problems for the real world, even promoting design as aid to developing countries, must have been somewhat surprising to the Norwegian design community, given the reputation that much of American design had in European design circles for being excessively commercialist.

The Future in Our Hands

Nine years after Knut Fægri wrote "The 'Designer'—the 11th Plague" in which he accused the designer of being the devil's advocate by selling his services as fashionism or by styling to an industry that was stuck in a spiraling quest for profit, some of his central arguments were taken up in *Bonytt*—but again not by someone belonging to the design community. An article titled "The Sales Carousel," a critique of the consumption society, appeared in an otherwise quite de-ideologized *Bonytt*.⁴⁵ The author was Erik Dammann, who was about to become one of Norway's most dedicated, radical, and idealistic promoters of social change in the 1970s. In the late 1960s, having become disillusioned with the consumerism his job at an advertising agency required him to promote, Dammann moved with his family to the small island of Savai in West Samoa to live among the natives for half a year. He was so struck by the traditional Polynesian culture of sharing and distribution that the stay changed his life. Back in Norway, he left advertising for good and dedicated his life to promoting a better world, an alternative society based on cooperation, sharing, and experiences instead of liberal market economy, competition, and consumption. In Dammann's criticism, just as it had been in Fægri's, the designer was one of the principal targets:

42 Gerd Hennem [sic], "Design—Et velstandsfenomen i den rike del av verden," *Nye Bonytt* 8/9 (1968): 62–5.

43 Ibid., 63.

44 Ibid., Statements made by Edward Hubbard Yonkers during his interview.

45 Erik Dammann, "Omsetningskarusellen," *Nye Bonytt* 1 (1971): 16–7. On the *De-ideologization of Bonytt*, see: Kjetil Fallan, "The Metamorphosis of a Norwegian Design Magazine: *Nye Bonytt*, 1968–71," in Grace Lees-Maffei (ed.), *Writing Design: Words and Objects* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2011): 47–61.

46 Dammann, op. cit., 17.

47 Ibid., 16–7, 28.

48 Erik Dammann, *Fremtiden i våre hender* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1972). English edition: Erik Dammann, *The Future in Our Hands* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979).

49 Wolfgang Haug, *Kritik der Warenästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971): 137. Another critical but less polemic German discussion of design's role in society appeared two years later in Gert Selle, *Ideologie und Utopie des Design: zur gesellschaftlichen Theorie der industriellen Formgebung* (Köln: DuMont, 1973).

The main problem for the restless consumers of the West is not just that there are too many advertisements, but just as much that there are too many material goods to advertise for. The affluence is not created by advertisement, but by industrial researchers, product developers and industrial designers, by engineers, chemists, artisans and architects—all those who work in production and commodity trade. Of course, there is nothing wrong in producing and selling goods that bring the buyer pleasure and enrich his way of life. The problem is that a substantial part of the goods that are manufactured today are *not* produced to give the buyer increased satisfaction in the long run, but to make him dissatisfied with what he already has, so that he will replace his possessions at an ever increasing rate ... Of course there are designers who primarily strive to create timeless products that simply have good and functional form. The problem is that they are a minority.⁴⁶

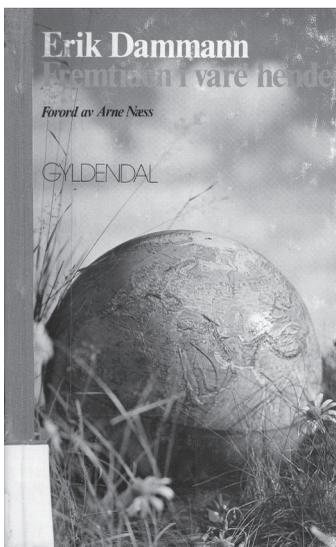
In addition to the striking similarities between the criticisms of Dammann and Fægri, there is also an important difference. Recall that Fægri, despite strong evocations of his expertise and interest in ecology and resource management, made no explicit link between these concerns and the commodity production he criticized. Dammann, on the other hand, clearly states that ecology and resource management, together with social justice, humanist values, and natural and cultural experiences, motivated his critique.⁴⁷ Although striking, this difference between Fægri and Dammann is hardly surprising, as much had changed—in terms of political climate, knowledge production, and public mentalities—between 1962 and 1971.

As for Dammann, he continued his work throughout the 1970s and beyond. In 1972, he published a book called *The Future in Our Hands* (*Fremtiden i våre hender*), in which he portrayed the glaring inequality of living conditions between the developing countries and the West and argued for a society of reduced production and consumption and a more fair distribution of resources (see Figure 3).⁴⁸ The book, which included a preface by eco-philosopher Arne Næss (who had recently, in 1970, retired from his professorship at the University of Oslo at the age of 58), formed the basis for the establishment two years later of the environmental organization/movement bearing its name. The movement grew during the 1970s to have more than 25,000 members and obtained considerable political influence.

Dammann's critique seems to correspond with contemporary campaigns elsewhere, as well. In Germany, Wolfgang Haug indicted design for serving as the "Red Cross of capitalism" in his *Kritik der Warenästhetik* (*Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*) from 1971.⁴⁹ A kindred

Figure 3

Cover of the book *Fremtiden i våre hender* [*The Future in Our Hands*] by Erik Dammann, first published in 1972. Cover photo by Bjørn Winsnes. Courtesy of Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.



and contemporary, but far more disseminated, critique of design as the lackey of consumer society was offered by Victor Papanek in his famous book, *Design for the Real World*.⁵⁰ Papanek, of course, traveled far and wide with his mission to reform design practice, but his Scandinavian connection is of particular interest in the present context. *Design for the Real World* was first published in Sweden in 1970, under the far more polemic title, *Miljön och miljonerna: design som tjänst eller förtjänst?* (translated *The Environment and the Millions: Design as Service or Profit?*). The English edition appeared the following year, in 1971. The book came about as a result of Papanek's being a guest lecturer at the Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm from 1968 to 1970, and he also guest lectured at design schools in Helsinki, Copenhagen and Oslo.⁵¹ Here, his radical ideas found a ready audience among the more progressive elements of the Scandinavian design community.

During a trip to Stockholm in 1968, just after he began teaching at the National College of Art and Design, Roar Høyland met Papanek and promptly invited him to Oslo. Papanek accepted and stayed for a week as a guest at Høyland's house while giving all-day lectures that attracted virtually every student at the design school. Theory was accompanied by action: During two weeks in January 1969, Papanek and Høyland staged an event where they and their students redesigned and transformed a notoriously neglected and polluted communal back yard in one of the city's less privileged neighborhoods into a more agreeable recreational area, complete with a playground, furnishings, greenery, and all. This stunt even made it onto national television news broadcast.⁵²

Already in 1969, then, a year before the first version of his famous book was published, Papanek's radical ideas on the social and moral responsibility of design were reaching Norwegian design students. According to Papanek, presenting the Oslo project in the book, the social aspects of it had quite an influence on the aspiring designers—and on other students as well:

The students were appalled to find that the backyard was infested by rats and that the children played with the rats and thought of them as pet animals, something of the order of small dogs. We saw that design would have to go beyond a playground to include factors of public health and hygiene. Because of the social relevance of this project, other students from the Architectural School [Oslo School of Architecture], the School of Landscape [Norwegian Agricultural College, Dept. of Landscape Architecture], and Oslo University [University of Oslo] became interested and volunteered their help, even though students from these schools normally have little or no contact with the State School of Design [National College of Art and Design].⁵³

50 Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human ecology and social change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

51 Victor Papanek, *Miljön och miljonerna: design som tjänst eller förtjänst?* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1970). On his lecturing at Konstfack, see Lasse Brunnström, "Från konst och teknik till industriell design" in Lasse Brunnström (ed.), *Svensk industridesign: en 1900-talshistoria* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1997) 39 and Kerstin Wickman, "Industridesign" in Gunilla Widengren (ed.), *Tanken och handen: Konstfack 150 år* (Stockholm: Page One Publishing, 1994): 286, 294–5. In the late 1960s, Papanek visited the University of Art and Design Helsinki on several occasions: Pekka Korvenmaa, *Finnish Design: A Concise History* (Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki, 2009) 222. In the 1970s, Papanek also lectured at the design program at The Royal Academy of Fine Arts' School of Architecture, Copenhagen: Hans-Christian Jensen, *Fra velfærd til designkultur—Velfærdsengagementet i dansk designteori og designpraksis i det 20. århundrede* [Doctoral dissertation] (Odense: University of Southern Denmark, 2005): 52.

52 Roar Høyland in conversation with the author, March 28, 2007.

53 Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human ecology and social change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971): 125.

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- 54 Kjetil Fallan, *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010): 55–6.
- 55 Dag Solstad, *Roman 1987* (Oslo: October, 1987): 244.

Marrying social responsibility with environmental regeneration, Høyland and Papanek's backyard playground project became emblematic of the new critical design discourse taking hold at the turn of the 1960s.

The reorientation of critical design discourse traced in this article, from consumer activism toward environmentalism, can also be couched as a politicization of design criticism. That part of the design discourse was moving in this direction was of course no isolated process, but a shift in what might be called the *seamless web of sociodesign*.⁵⁴ This sense of (need for) change, felt so strongly in many progressive parts of society at large, has been described quite poignantly by the novelist Dag Solstad, who let his radical historian protagonist recall the sentiment of 1971: "I suspected that modernity had changed from aesthetics to politics, from art to revolution."⁵⁵