



Re-thinking designing

Impact Case Study

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Design

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Abstract

The objective of the research presented in this thesis was to explore human experiences as ground for workplace design. The aim was to develop pragmatic tools and guidelines for work and workplace design based on a reflective design tradition. The study was undertaken between 2008-2010 in a research project called the 'Future Factory', which can be characterized as an experiment in change-by-design. The project background was a number of reports on young people opting out of industrial work and women being in the minority within the Swedish industry sector. Therefore, in this project the ambition was to particularly explore and emphasise young people's and women's ideas about future work and workplaces.





The research involved exploring alternative solutions for a future factory through a series of design-for-change interventions with a variety of actors, through a so-called 'design lab' approach. The initial phase of this approach consisted of context mapping, as explorations of different actors' experiences through interviews and observations. The resulting material was portrayed in the form of 'Personas'. In this project, these fictional characters were used both to communicate and explore various actors' perspectives in subsequent collaborative activities. Also, a group of young people contributed with Future scenarios. The scenarios were characterized as an idealized positive 'Utopia' and an idealized negative 'Dystopia', used as tools to discuss implications and alternative solutions. Both Personas and Scenarios were subsequently used in a series of Future Workshops with various project-related interest groups, such as industrial managers and employees and trade union representatives. In this project, a group of women and one of young people were also especially invited to explore visions of a future factory.

The research presented in this thesis contributes to practice with methods, tools and guidelines for a reflective and innovative design. The theoretical research contribution is the correlation between theories and concepts of change, learning by doing, doing gender, and a reflective design practice.

Summary of impact beyond academia

The doctoral research approach and the practice-based design research methodology resulted in further refinement of the design-for-change methodology. This resulted in NOVA, a method kit for those interested in building a norm-critical approach into their innovation projects. NOVA – methods and tools for norm-creative innovation, is a method card package of 52 methods for challenging obstructing or discriminating norms in design, 12 tactics for doing so, 12 norm examples from different design areas, and 12 role models as inspiring examples.

The Nova toolkit has been downloaded and used in a lot of different businesses globally and nationally, and is now distributed by one of the main research funders in Sweden. It has been acknowledged by international design consultants, see here: <https://veryday.com/aspect/innovation-beyond-social-norms/>

Underpinning research, context and summary of methodology

Design-for-change; reflective practice; norm-creative/inclusive design: Establishing norms in communities is often helpful. We can all agree that not



committing crimes and not hurting others are examples of good, normal behaviour. But certain norms are restrictive rather than beneficial – and can lead to discrimination based on gender, age, sexuality, health, personality, socioeconomic status, and variations of ability, ethnicity or culture.

Norm criticism, an approach that's become popular in Sweden, is a way to bring these issues to the forefront. Norm criticism is about understanding, problematizing and changing notions that limit people's lives. It allows us to expand the definition of what's considered normal in society, giving people a wider range of opportunities that previously may not have been available to them. Norm criticism is an intersectional method that involves challenging our biases and opening up more possibilities for people to become their true selves.

The approach is not necessarily about designing specifically for those outside current norms or trying to design one product to meet every single individual need – it's about ensuring that what we design does not perpetuate harmful and restrictive norms or unnecessarily exclude certain groups.

References produced by researcher from/during doctoral research

Nova toolkit: <https://www.bokus.com/bok/9789187537486/nova-tools-and-methods-for-norm-creative-innovation/>

Wikberg Nilsson, Å. (2012). Re-thinking designing. PhD thesis, Design, Luleå University of Technology

NOVA toolkit: <https://www.bokus.com/bok/9789187537431/nova-verktyg-och-metoder-for-normkreativ-innovation/>

Wikberg Nilsson, Å. (2018). Tactics for norm-creative innovation. She-Ji, The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation, 4(4):375-391

Details of impact

Nova was Design S nominee in 2016 (Swedish Craft and Design award)

Acknowledged and used by national and international design consultants (e.g. Veryday; Experio Lab; Oh my!; Helicopter; Mycket; Geektown; Yours; Urban Futures, Substorm, Tromb)



Reach beyond the design area, contact with a lot of businesses for learning more of “norms in form”, and “form of norms”.



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