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PAST FUTURE

DESIGN PRACTICE | HISTORY | SOCIO-CULTURAL | LEARNING



ABSTRACT

STUDYING THE PAST CAN BE A THRILLING JOURNEY ENABLING DESIGNERS TO UNDERSTAND CONTINUOUS CULTURAL CHANGE. BY ANALYZING PAST SOCIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES, DESIGNERS WILL GAIN IMPORTANT INSIGHTS INTO CONTEMPORARY DESIGN ISSUES.

For 21st century textile design students it can be challenging to connect to past issues and utilize historical references for their own inspiration. In my observation textile education still puts emphasis on studying the formalistic aesthetics of a period, rather than the underlying socio-cultural developments. The following paper portrays a museum-based student project and debates the importance of incorporating user-focused research into the course curriculum.



MUSEUM MEETS ART COLLEGE

In autumn 2007 Professor Susanne Lorenz and I initiated a project with fifteen first year students from the textile and product design courses at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg (HFBK) in Germany. Students were briefed to study historical sources to inspire their own design developments, acknowledging the past but without producing 'traditional' outcomes. The starting point was less the form and functionality of classical artifacts, but the investigation of socio-cultural trends. How did these influence the invention of new design strands and how would they be used to inform future work?

During the early stages of this project we approached Dr. Nicole Tiedemann, the new curator of the prominent Jenisch House Museum in Hamburg (figure 1). Her main interest in the collaboration was to get students to challenge the classical set up of the museum's display and to invite a dialogue between the venerable 19th century interior and contemporary design objects.

Very enthusiastic about our approach she generously opened the museum's collections for hands on study and invited us to use the first floor of the museum as an exhibition space. The

project concluded in an exhibition called 'Room with a View' in May 2008, juxtaposing the students' work with the permanent collection.

The following paragraph will analyse the process of the project from initial research to the final exhibition – contemplating how students struggled with past references, how they achieved an insightful understanding of objects and their context and how they translated their findings into contemporary design by using technology and alternative materials.

BRIDGING: PAST TRENDS AS A SOURCE FOR CREATIVE RESEARCH

The project aimed to build bridges between various grounds: between textile and product design: the college environment and the museum as well as linking the 19th century with the 21st century.

Using tradition as a source for innovation has been a constant theme throughout art and design history and classical studies are deeply embedded in education. Past and present have been joined through reproduction, re-invention and innovation in ever changing combinations. Observing the re-emerging interest in a certain period (e.g. Gothic) and changing perceptions as history progresses, teaches us as much about tradition as

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the present. Eric Hobsbawn observes in 'The Invention of Tradition' [1983]: 'It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the 'invention of tradition' so interesting...'. Often a traditional source stays the same but the contemporary 'take' leads the way for new directions.

Having worked in trend forecasting for the past ten years my approach to textile design education is very much driven by an interest in socio-cultural issues. I argue that textile education still puts a large emphasis on formal design aesthetics, while missing out on emerging social issues, relating to design. This is somehow not surprising as textiles will always treat us with their visual and sensual qualities and students should celebrate all the possibilities of material and pattern. What would be desirable though is to open novel strands for textile designers: exploring emerging social issues to gain a holistic understanding of society's needs. With this awareness designers will be able to devise new applications for future materials and design services. As Sophia Parker [2009] writes in her paper 'Social Animals: tomorrow's designers in today's world' students already begin

'to question the idea that design is primarily about material culture, or the business of making things'. I would like to debate that institutions need to review their curriculum to adapt to these changes.

Our aim for the project was to make students aware of the underlying social issues that inform design and to support them to incorporate this thinking into their own projects. The core of the project brief was the research of sociological issues of 19th Century in Germany, such as 'retreat into privacy' and relating them to demographic trends effecting society today and in the future. Students were encouraged to analyze the similarities of the Zeitgeist of the Biedermeier and today's trends such as 'the work from home syndrome' by linking the specific use of an object to its sociological time frame.

BIEDERMEIER DETECTIVES

"... people are different now from then, whenever the 'then' was; so interpretation, repacking of things and images from the past for meaningful contemporary contemplation, is fundamental to the museums' role."

P.J. Fowler, 1992

The Jenisch House Museum is set in the former residence of one of Hamburg's most famous merchants

and patrons Martin Johann Jenisch. It combines some of the remains of the original interior with a general collection of furniture and textiles from the same period (figure 2).

The building itself was planned from 1828 to 1831 by architect Franz Gustav Forsmann, who was consulted by K.F. Schinkel; the mastermind behind Germany's classicism movement. Completed in 1834, Johanna Lessmann [2002] describes the Jenisch House as representing "the claim of self-presentation of the political active member of the upper classes". The monumental white cube is embellished with golden latticework. Set prominently overlooking the river Elbe it is surrounded by an extensive English landscape park on grounds that were originally designed as an ornamented farm. The house was mainly used as a summer residence for the family, hosting numerous of society-events. What is noticeable is that the upper class in Hamburg around the early 19th century took pride in acting as the commercial and philanthropic driving force behind a wealthy and democratic city state: dismissing aristocratic ties and existing independently from neighbour Prussia. At that time Hamburg was at the forefront of democratic thinking: restructuring its social support system for the poor.

Many of these political initiatives were initiated in elite circles in private houses. This is particularly important in relation to the political developments in Central Europe during that time, which led to widespread political oppression and censorship of the creative arts.

At the beginning of the project the participating students seemed less excited about starting a design dialogue with a museum's collection. One of the biggest challenges was to encourage students to dig into the history of the building and its collections. They were simply not interested in the representation of the interior and the dusty old museum display, which didn't seem to have anything to do with contemporary design issues. "Do not touch!" seemed to be all it was saying. For the students the past seemed like a massive period of static information not particularly related to the democratic environment of design students today. Key to shifting their attitude towards the project was changing their view of history as a fixed given set of findings. Sue Rowley describes in 'Reinventing Textiles' (1999): 'The authority of History challenged, histories are understood now to be partial, constructed narratives, which cannot substantiate a claim to be disinterested, unified or conclusive'. By discovering individual tales of Biedermeier the students started to enjoy the detective work and gathered vital information for their own research.

In the end it was the personal narratives of the residents that really drew the students into the project. Researching deeper into the life of the people who lived and worked at the Jenisch House finally captured the students' curiosity and imagination. It was little details that triggered the creative process: a hidden staircase for the former employees at the Jenisch

House (figure 3), a pipe stand in the study room as well as the remains of the 'multi-purpose' original bath tub of Mrs. Jenisch. All of these were revealing further insights into characteristic habits, illustrating the specific Zeitgeist and social circumstances of the Biedermeier.

RESOURCE: ZEITGEIST

During the first couple of weeks of the project, a variety of different sources were introduced to the students to inform areas of their research. The project was accompanied by guided tours through the Jenisch House and park as well as a number of lectures covering related aspects from art and design history, trend forecasting, journalism, exhibition design and design technology. The group was given open access to the museum's collection to research into furniture making as well as the study of traditional textile techniques and materials.

Students were encouraged to investigate their own perception of today's Zeitgeist, questioning whether it was true or not that contemporary society is withdrawing further from the outside world, making the home the epicentre of their lives. How would these new parameters influence the living space and the need for 'products' in the future? What should for example a future kitchen cater for? Akiko Bush [1999] describes her newly designed kitchen as incorporating 'a desk, home computer, bookshelves – a veritable home office. It is the place bills are paid, important phone calls are made, the business of everyday life is attended to, all of it reinforcing the idea that we find solace in working in the kitchen – and if we don't find it in baking a loaf of bread, we'll bring other, equally satisfying work that needs to be done into the room'.

Was it all motivated by new services and virtual communities accessible through the internet (figure 4)? Did advanced computer technology trigger the rise of the 'Neue Bürgerlichkeit' (new urban middle class mentality) in Germany in the beginning of the 21st century? Would the values of this new tribe influence their choices and how could design enhance their lifestyle? Historian Manfred Hettling [2006] writes about the new urban bourgeoisie as 'built on the principles of individuality, responsibility and self-organisation. To seek one's own way in an indistinguishable world with the support of those principles defines the new urban middle class mentality'.

Again, it was relatively insignificant aspects of contemporary life that the students picked up on as being relevant, relating them directly to the Biedermeier lifestyle: for example the recent ban on smoking in public with the creation of private smoking clubs having a possible link with the superb men's smoking room in the Jenisch House. Other research was based around the creation of the surrounding ornamented farmland and its connection to contemporary guerrilla gardening – both dedicated and radical approaches to enhance natural experiences in everyday life.

BATHING ABOUT

'Bathing About', a project by Camilla de Wet, a first year student with no previous knowledge of textile design, represents the recurring elements of the design process in the Jenisch House exhibition project.

The students were briefed to respond to the museum's interior by choosing one piece of the collection acting as a 'Muse' to inspire contemporary design outcome. Looking through the Jenisch House, Camilla felt immediately attracted to the landlady's private bathroom and especially its

centre piece: an enormous ceramic bathtub. Painted with faux marble effects it seemed like an intriguing piece of circumstantial evidence of the Biedermeier. Here the private site of Mrs. Jenisch seemed to come to life, compared to the other much more formal function rooms in the residence. Research into the museum's archive revealed the original architectural plan of the first floor to be different to the past. During the Biedermeier period the bathroom was combined with a separate neighbouring dressing room. To have one's own bathroom in the 19th century was a novelty in Hamburg and must have been seen as a pure indulgence at the time. Another discovery was that the bathtub had only recently been rescued from the park, where it had served as a gigantic flowerpot for over six decades. The overall arrangement of the house became a source of inspiration: an interior happily coexisting with the surrounding exterior landscape park and former 19th century ornamented farmland.

Armed with some past references Camilla found it much easier to pin point future lifestyle trends: how do people relax, cleanse and refresh today and would they have anything in common with the bathing Biedermeier bourgeoisie? Camilla continued by mapping emerging social trends through analyzing contemporary consumer behavior and new material developments. Looking at today's society with the past in mind, it was easier for her to focus and distinguish new trends. For example, the new interior design at the trendy Somerset spa Babington House suddenly seemed relevant to the project, as their hotel rooms feature a bathtub in the middle of a spacious bedroom. Camilla identified this as a new approach to bathing as a celebrated experience, rather than a closeted

necessity to keep clean. Camilla's original concept was to bring a piece of the park into the building to create a transformational atmosphere in the bathroom. Her idea was to design a space that would both revitalize the museum's dusty bath display and operate as a prototype for a made to measure carpet, inspired by the soothing moss covered grounds in the Jenisch Park's woodland. De Wet [2008] describes her aim to create 'A space for relaxation and tranquility. To unwind, look around, enjoy and refresh.' – A bath with a view!

Like most students Camilla initially struggled to narrow down her ideas and make a logical connection between her work and the museum's space. Often the initial concept became a literal translation of the research findings ending in a trivial room installation. Projects were overloaded with ideas and tutors had to work hard to extract the essence of each concept. What really helped the process was the introduction of a 1:200 wooden scale model of the whole building, allowing students to try their ideas out in small scale. Through digital media, mainly CAD, photos and film, students could simulate and modify the final set up. Weekly group critiques brought in additional peer response and support, creating a close-knit community among the students. The first year studio evolved into a buzzing head quarters for the exhibition.

Originally Camilla planned to build a massive textile tree in the room (figure 5), which she then redesigned into a hand-tufted 10qm carpet customised to fit around the elegant Jenisch House bathtub. Her main concern was to create an engaging textile experience that would revitalize the Museum's display and engage the audience with the space. Having never used a tufting machine before she put in

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a lot of effort to test suitable yarns. The haptic quality of the carpet was particularly difficult to achieve, as she wanted the user to take off their shoes and feel the material. Camilla decided to use a range of different natural and man-made yarns to get the moss-like surface she required. To get a contemporary looking texture she included micro-fiber because of its soft feel and shiny appearance (figure 6).

The final production of the 10qm piece in a short amount of time took a lot of manpower and determination. Camilla had tremendous feedback from the curator and the museum's visitors. Especially children responded very well to her piece and spent hours rolling around on the floor (figure 7). Asked what was the most difficult problem she encountered during the project she replied: "To trust the design concept during the process of making..."

CONCLUSION

After much work the opening of the exhibition "Room with a View" finally took place in May 2008. The show was accompanied by a programme of talks and tours around the building reaching a wide range of audience. Due to popular demand much of the exhibition pieces were later acquired to be on permanent display in the museum (figure 7 and 8). The show had some local press reviews, web presence and was documented in an exhibition catalogue, sponsored by the Museum.

Looking back I feel all parties involved in the project and exhibition benefited from the experience. The students not only obtained a great amount of research experience, technical and communication skills, they also gained an enormous boost in confidence to trust their own ability to initiate and carry out an open design brief. It was challenging for students to get an 'objective' view of the present,

because it is simply impossible to have an overall detached view of the present or the past. However, through breaking complex issues into smaller bits and matching them with personal case studies, students started to understand more about the social issues influencing future design directions, looking beyond the obvious. Not everybody achieved a visionary insight or managed to create highly sophisticated design outcomes and/or develop non-traditional material applications. But all students produced original work based on their own primary research and even more importantly discovered new frontiers. In educational terms they gained threshold knowledge – defined by J.H.F Meyer and R. Land [2003] as "core concepts that once understood, transform perception of a given subject" further enriching their awareness of contemporary design issues, hopefully transforming their understanding of education as a life long road of exciting discoveries waiting to be made.

Ideally, I would have liked to incorporate more practical workshops into the project. Introducing the students to a range of unknown technologies and materials, as some of them struggled to translate and realise their interesting concepts through the use of new processes. Hopefully, they will be keen to explore these routes during the rest of their studies, after all this was only their first six months at the college. It is difficult to judge how much the project overall benefited the students in terms of direct links to the textile industry. The question that comes to mind for us as tutors is 'what industries do we want the students to design for in the future anyway'? As for textile designers the work environment has dramatically changed in the past fifteen years, especially across what was known as the former Western

Europe. Manufacturing and production has more or less been shipped off to distant shores and fast changing technical and scientific innovation has further blurred the profile of the 'default employer'. I agree with Sophia Parker [2009] that degree courses are often failing to equip students "adequately for the new environments they wish to work in. As a number of the students noted, this kind of 'deep' user research made new demands of them, in terms of empathy, emotional intelligence, and a willingness to look beyond the most obvious dynamics at play, whilst maintaining a design mindset". In that sense the project set out to question the students' expectation of design in general exploring new routes for different applications in the future. From my experience I feel academic staff in Further and Higher Education need to include issue based learning outcomes as early as possible into the Course Curriculum, to enable students to produce more holistic design work.

Certainly our 'client', the Museum, was very pleased with the achievement of the students in delivering their part of the brief: to explore new ways of (re) presenting the past in a traditional set up, creating an open dialogue between the collection, the audience and design innovation. Nicole Tiedemann [2008], the curator of the Museum described it as: 'The museum has been included in a complex debate around historical questions, their representatives, their spaces, their materiality and our dealing with it.'

As for the textile design course it opened new roads to related industries: one of the product design students wanted to transfer to the textile design department afterwards and has since started his own screen printing business. Other students went on to work placements as exhibition

designers or in textile conservation; some used their new found analytical skills in trend forecasting – I suspect there will be more interesting shifts to come.

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RELEVANT WEBLINKS

Jenisch House Museum <http://www.altonaermuseum.de/jenisch-haus/ausstellungen/schausammlungen/ansicht.html?uniqid=42>

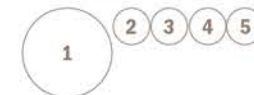
HfbK, University of the Arts Hamburg: <http://www.hfbk-hamburg.de/index.php?id=557>

http://www.hfbk-hamburg.de/fileadmin/user_upload/newsletter/archiv/2008/newsletter_HFBK_nr47.pdf

FIGURES

1-4: Marr, A., 2008 [Photograph]
5-6, 8: De Wet, C., 2008 [Photograph]
7: Schneider, E., 2008. Stiftung Historische Museen Hamburg – Altonaer Museum [Photograph]
Anne Marr, London 2009

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- 1 The Jenisch House Museum, main entrance
- 2 Biedermeier interior in the Jenisch House
- 3 Hidden staircase at the Jenisch House
- 4 Changing aspects of contemporary home life
- 5 Camilla de Wet – prototype in 1:200 room model

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- 6 Camilla de Wet, 'Bathing Abour'; carpet detail
- 7 Camilla de Wet, 'Bathing Abour'; hand-tufted wool-microfibre carpet
- 8 Camilla de Wet, 'Bathing Abour'; detail of display