

Design School Kolding

Welcoming speech 2016-2017 by Elsebeth Gerner Nielsen

Introduction

Dear Students. Dear Staff. Welcome back to a new academic year. Not least welcome to all you new students. We have been looking forward to meeting you. Everyone, please stand up and let's give three cheers for class of 2016.

Design School Kolding's ambition

You have come to a design school that is really more a university than a school, with three years for a Bachelor's degree and two for a Master's, after which you can call yourselves Master of Design. In other words, you are not pupils. You are students. The difference lies in the expectation of your independence and contribution to your own and your fellow students' education.

You have not come to any old design school. You have come to a school with specific values and a clear ambition. This school aims to be among the best in the world, and we wish to make you some of the best designers in the world. Nothing less. Design School Kolding must be a school that is – in the most qualified manner – part of the effort to address the demands of today's society, businesses and public sector – with the impact being increased prosperity and welfare.

It is our ambition to educate you in such a manner that you are certain to be able to create value for society. This of course also means that you get a job or start a sustainable business. However, Design School Kolding is also an institution that plans ahead in order to contribute to the society of the future.

We must be a school that dares; that has the courage to experiment and thereby inspire the future. That is why you are not only educated for the job market of the here and now, but also to shape the job market and society to come. To what **is**. And to what will come.

This we do with a foundation based on three values: **Cultural diversity**, meaning that we wish to contribute to a diverse world and to create room for diversity ourselves. **Social inclusion**; that we want to design for all and to be a school with room for variation. **Sustainability**; that we wish to contribute to a world that protects equality between current and future generations. We do our part to contribute with solar panels on the roof and bio-friendly canteen food.

The design school's vision

Our vision is this: to be an international talent workshop for the cultivation of Danish Design.

Let me expand on the phrasing by starting from the four concepts:

International

Talent

Workshop

Danish Design

Internationalisation

Denmark is a small country. However, it has a very strong design tradition. We can be very proud of this tradition – however, it will wither if it is not continually nurtured and inspired from without. Any culture that shuts itself in, dies. That is why it is crucial for the school to align itself outwards, internationally. And that motivates our requirement for every student to accrue at least 15 ECTS points abroad, equal to a half semester. To that end, we have founded two outposts: one in Shang Hai in collaboration with Tongji University and one in São Paulo, Brazil. Formerly, the school had an outpost in Kumasi, Ghana. Outposts offer students the opportunity to complete part of their training supervised by the school's own teachers and the partner university. Our international department is working hard to secure exchange agreements for every student who wishes with some of the world's best design academies.

Accordingly, we expect all scientific staff to contribute to the global design agenda by publishing papers in international publications and by taking part in the most significant, international events. That is part of the motivation behind regularly participating in, for example, Milan Design Week. Here, five or six alumni from Design School Kolding get to showcase their talents.

Generally, every member of the school's staff contributes towards the internationalisation. Our Head of Canteen, Mette, regularly participates in international conferences, outposts and exhibitions.

The internationalisation is part of daily life. Right now there are students from 22 different countries attending our Master's Programme, and three of our heads of subject are from abroad. The same is true of many of our other staff.

In other words, our money is where our mouth is when it comes to cultural diversity. Diversity rules here – because we are certain that Danish design evolves best in an open culture of honest, critical exchange. And, we work on improving ourselves all the time. To an increasing degree, English is our working language, and every member of staff is offered the opportunity to improve their English language skills. As you can tell, we still have a ways to go before we are completely fluent. I know I do.

Our delightful canteen also contributes to the international atmosphere by regularly encouraging our foreign students and staff members to help evolve the menu. You can all look forward to that.

Danish Design

Internationalisation is, then, a tool for developing Danish Design. But what is Danish Design? Lots of books and articles have been written on the subject. I believe that those of us that grew up with Danish Design struggle to actually identify it. We may see the element of shape: the choice of good materials and the good craftsmanship with an eye for detail, where the aesthetic qualities are realised in a simple idiom of shape that often uses light as a significant raw material.

However, the fact of the matter is that Danish Design is a deeply ingrained part of our society and our culture. The democratic nature of Danish Design is a significant marker. Take, for example, Danish fashion, which is not something one experiences only on the catwalk. No, we experience fashion everywhere, in the street, especially because Danish fashion is affordable. Or, take the Danish furniture tradition with FDB and Børge Mogensen as the leading lights, who after World War 2 made certain that everyone had access to quality seating, either at home or in the doctor's office, in church or in school.

Danish Design is composed of certain values – such as accessibility for everyone. Designers bring these values with them, when they go out into the world. When the world loves Danish Design, it is not just because Danish Design is beautiful, but because it contains crucial values. Danish Design is part of the foundation on which the welfare state and welfare society is built. That society runs on the realisation that few have too much and fewer have too little.

Today, Danish Design is increasingly moving away from design of individual products towards contributing to developing systems and experiences that further support the development of the welfare society. User involvement in the shape of user driven innovation or co-design seems to be crucial elements. This dialogue-based approach is also a feature of our teaching at Design School Kolding. I will come back to that.

I do not have a perfect definition of what Danish Design is or should be. That definition is always developing, partly by your efforts. To that purpose, we have created an interactive wall, which we hope that you will all contribute to with words, phrases and sketches that you think are fair descriptions of Danish design. That does not mean that we do not have a clear concept of how best to contribute to the development of Danish Design. That process is channeled through our three strategic focal areas:

Design and sustainability. Because we are convinced that we cannot simply keep burning through raw materials and resources. And the designer has a considerable responsibility in that context. Denmark is well-placed to make unique contributions thanks to the thrift and frugality that are traditional characteristics of the Danish culture of design.

Design and social inclusion (welfare design), because Danish Design is democratic and that democratic tradition may evolve to include even more people in nurturing community, society and their own lives.

Design and play, because it is Homo Ludens – the playing and creating human – and not only Homo Faber, the producing man, that has an agency in how the world develops in the 21st century. In Denmark, play and playfulness have been a momentous element in the culture of modern society. We have believed in play as the road towards learning. We have allowed children to play and most of us will defend free play as imperative to children's development. Could we perhaps use that mindset to lift Danish Design development further? That is what we believe and continually train to improve here at Design School Kolding.

It is the general, underlying basis of this school that sustainability, social inclusion and play may serve as leverage to take Danish Design into a new era where we sustain and evolve the Danish Design tradition with the world as our playground. Our goal is that Danish Design remains characterised *also* by beautiful 1950's chairs but is mainly characterised by meaningful shaping that supports everyone in developing their true potential as creators. And contributes considerably to a world that is sustainable, socially inclusive and playful. I look forward to seeing your contributions to that development.

Talent

Our student intake is based squarely on talent. We accept an average of 10% of applicants. The three-step acceptance process is based on criteria that are founded on our definition of talent. The ability to analyse an issue and formulate an aesthetic and meaningful solutions to it is key. We accept students that we believe can be part of realising our vision. The Master's Programme accepts the best, irrespective of background. The Bachelor's programme only accepts Scandinavian students.

The focus on talent is a red thread running through everything the school does – from hiring staff to making promotions, etc. When we hire an office or kitchen trainee, we pick the best one. And we expect the best from them.

But what is talent? Talent is not only something one is born with, but some people have a natural fondness for certain things. And that fondness can be nurtured into something special by parents, friends, teachers and one's surroundings in general. Hardly anybody becomes a star by their own force alone. Talent needs fellowship and nurturing. However, a very important prerequisite for talent to develop into greatness is willpower. It seems to me willpower is just as crucial as talent if you are to become a great designer. Talent evolves from both will and ability.

In this school we cultivate talent via highly individualised supervision to ensure that the individual student gets continual feedback. In addition, it is important that students practice giving and receiving constructive feedback. And that the individual on their own or with others keep setting new goals for their development.

Another substantial part of the way this school nurtures talent is our belief that talent develops best when play and learning go hand in hand. You must have the opportunity to play and to experiment. To test your own and your design's limits.

We also cultivate talent by encouraging students to participate in international talent competitions and by the school itself participating in competitions and rankings. Design School Kolding's Industrial Design programme is ranked among the top 50 programmes in Europe. And our Fashion Programme ranks among the best 50 in the world. We are ranked 26th, to be specific.

Workshop

We base our teaching on new knowledge, which is continuously collected and produced by our researchers, developers and teachers. The training to become a designer is founded in theory, on one hand, and the manifestation of practice on the other. Popularly speaking, you must be able to shift from your head to your hands and back. This is a particular trait of the design profession, and so Design School Kolding distinguishes itself from traditional universities by having workshops where students are able to develop important craftsmanship experience and craftsmanship skill.

You will also get to know the design process and come to understand its amazing potential as a tool for identifying problems and discovering new solutions. It will

enable you to take innovation within your particular field to new levels. Of course there is not just one design process, there are many. You will learn how to create, communicate and manage design processes that match the particular challenge you are working on. You will learn to cooperate with others in the design process and learn how to involve and facilitate people with different competences and perspectives than your own.

At the same time, you will be able to develop your individual skills, build experiences and expertise by producing prototypes, drawing, draping, etc. Not only to express and unfold your own particular skill, while of course this is essential, but also to be able to identify and define excellence. Working with materials and getting to know them will eventually perfect your ability to see and discover when something is okay – and when it is brilliant.

We very much develop the physical and mental space of our workshops together with the surrounding society. We have partnership agreements with ECCO, LEGO, Copenhagen FUR, Trefor, Kolding Municipality and Hospital Lillebælt. In addition, we work with a huge number of other companies and public institutions. From the very first day of school, we teach our students to work with the wider community. For instance, we require you to complete your BA and MA projects with an external partner.

Design School Kolding is an institution that will challenge and train you on a variety of levels in a variety of ways. And we will involve you in discussions about how to organise the teaching. The democratic values also apply to the way we work together. We and I expect you to contribute actively to discussions of what Design School Kolding should be and where we are heading.

Summary

Allow me to sum up: Design School Kolding is an international talent workshop for the cultivation of Danish Design.

At a recent staff seminar in the town of Højer, the school staff was able to work on our vision and how to translate it into practice. Almost everything I have said today sums up the discussions we had at this seminar. Thank you all very much for your input.

Now I hope that all of you new colleagues – because that is primarily how I think of you students – will contribute to new interpretations of our vision and help us grow and advance nationally and internationally. We need to move to the fourth quadrant in the system of coordinates which reflects current and future needs.

Conclusion

Once again welcome to a new academic year. We look forward to learning what Danish Design means to you. And to watching you contribute to the concept of new Danish Design in a world that is very much in need of your creative powers and of design.

Thank you.