Designing For Inclusion Rather Than Exclusion

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Design constitutes a significant dimension in contemporary Western consumption societies. The design practice is important as it implicitly determines consumers’ ability to create a meaningful life. Designers in favor of the ‘philosophy’ of Universal design object to the traditional segregation and stereotyping in design of people who do not fit ‘the norm’, such as children, elderly, and disabled. However, Universal design is not intended as niche design but to broaden mainstream design. Based on interviews with an interpretive approach done within the design field, designers’ view of consumers in relation to Universal design is discussed.

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“Designing for Inclusion Rather Than Exclusion”
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Today design permeates all levels in society and is acknowledged in contemporary consumer cultures both as a practice of creating desirable objects and for consumers as a means to create a meaningful life (e.g., Lury, 1997). Most interfaces we as consumers meet in our everyday life, such as products and environments, have been ‘designed’ in one way or another. If then design, as an important aspect in consumers’ everyday life, is discriminatory it becomes a social issue. This paper introduces the ‘philosophy’ of Universal design that can be viewed as a visionary declaration towards design that counteracts exclusion and thus creates a more ‘inclusive’ society. Universal design can be defined as “an approach to design that incorporates products as well as building features which, to the greatest extent possible, can be used by everyone” (Preiser and Ostroff, 2001). However, Universal design is often mistaken for design for specific consumer groups, that is, design for disabled and elderly (e.g., Welsh, 1995; Leibrock and Terry, 1999). The ambition is instead to broaden mainstream design and make attractive and marketable products and environments usable for more people. Ability impairments should therefore not stand in the way for individual consumers to choose in accordance to their preferences for aesthetics and other important aspects.

As consumers we want aesthetically pleasant things but at the same time we need most of them to be usable. The aesthetic aspect of design has been investigated for some time in consumer research (e.g., Holbrook, 1986; Veryzer, 2000). Visual aesthetics is important, as product appearance is what consumers initially meet (Bloch, Brunel and Arnold, 2003; Creusen and Schoormans, 2005). The usability aspect is explained by Norman (1998) as the need for design to make sure that a user can grasp what to do and knows what is going on. Nevertheless, we experience things with all our senses to a greater or lesser extent (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), something comprised in the aesthetics of useful products (Monö, 1997) and thus important when considering Universal design.

The purpose with this paper is to illustrate how designers within the field of Universal design understand the concept and, more specifically, how they view users or consumers in relation to design. Twelve in-depth interviews have been carried out with designers (architects, designers and traffic planners) talking explicitly about Universal design, Design for All or Design for Accessibility, which are some of the most common concepts within this area.

In the interviews the designers depict Universal design as a means to create opportunities for more people to take part in everyday life and participate in society on equal terms. They give emphasis to the way of ‘thinking’ in order to avoid exclusion by design and how to work with inequalities and inaccessibilities. Because then independent of their abilities consumers will no longer feel ‘handicapped’. They have an ambition not to distinguish between disabled and ‘abled’ people or others diverting from the norm, such as children, elderly, immigrants et cetera. Instead, everyone should be considered to be alike, everyone should have the same possibilities. Nevertheless, when discussing projects they have been involved in, the designers still tend to talk mostly about different groups of disabled and in addition how working with these groups also provide other user groups with more accessible environments or easy handled products. The aesthetic aspect of design is on the other hand not something reflected much upon among the designers in the interviews. Some of the designers view Universal design as a force against the increased flashy design without true content that seems to have taken over the ‘good’ design where people’s true needs are acknowledged. This is also reflected in a number of things that people in their everyday life do not know how to handle, often involving technology.

One of the obstacles with Universal design is how to handle the diversity among consumers in the design process. It seems to result in choosing limited user groups, often disabled only. There is thus a risk that user tests then provide very good information on the accessibility or usability aspects but lack information on other aspects important for making environments and products understandable and pleasant as well. However, the fact that aesthetics does not seem to be an important issue among the interviewed designers may be a result of the need to explain why Universal design is important and the fact that complex diversities should be handled in the design process.

The opportunity with Universal design seems to be its implication for people that today are discriminated by design. Our personal self-esteem, identity, and well-being are deeply affected by our ability to function in our physical surroundings with a sense of comfort, independence and control (Kanes Weisman 4/1999). Further, a potential market demand of usable and aesthetical pleasant products is emerging due to the growing elderly population and a Universal design approach could thus be used to create consumption choices important for retaining quality of life. In order to reflect Universal design in mainstream design the first step would be to consider consumers with diverse abilities in the conceptualization of targeted consumer groups. This requires knowledge and a capability in the next step to get beyond abilities and design marketable products et cetera.

But it is essential not to forget that designers besides handling diversity among consumers must also recognize the significance of visual aesthetics because for consumers this is important in their quest for a meaningful life. Norman (2004) even suggests that aesthetically pleasant things also work better because then consumers experience them more positively and thus consider them easier to use. Therefore more research is required to further the understanding of how designers working with a Universal design approach actually consider the aspect of aesthetics in their work.

References


