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Kaleidoscope: A Call for reflections
About the Design of a Good Life

by
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Warning
This article takes life rather than design as its starting point.
If anything it sees life as an ultimate design, or design as a life form, or a life
dedicated to design as a form of wisdom, or wisdom itself as a manifestation
of design.
These pages are rife with quotations, but they are neither literary nor scientific.
The quotes spring from that artistic and responsible attitude that shapes our
individual and collective experience.
What is purposefully missing from this essay is all possible theoretical ortho-
dodoxy, every staunch fundamentalism and all tendency to worship design for
design’s sake. All the rest however remains, as if design were to be considered
an unwitting hinge, a place where memories, echoes, snapshots of all that
matters in life are stored, the cogs of life itself.

Ante Factum
Last February Professor Johan Huldt broke the news to me that 2005 was to
be the “Year of Design” in Sweden. A great opportunity for our Department to
under-take to draw up a series of guidelines for “good design for a good life”. I
agree with Johan Huldt that the time has come design to be placed under
close scrutiny. And I think that Sweden, given its tradition for quality design,
may find a favourable reception on an international level, for its efforts in this
direction.

But I also have a problem. The same kind of problem I am confronted with
when I try to follow a recipe in the kitchen. I consider myself a good cook but
on condition that I am not beholden to the tyranny of any form of recipe, any list
made up of measures, grams, ounces that usually hang threateningly as a form
of censorship over the currents of flame, oil, cream, egg yokes that run rife in
the kitchens of every free thinking citizen.
Coming up with a manifesto sounds very much like writing a recipe book. I honestly feel that a manifesto on design would be hard to swallow for designers, businessmen and design consumers.

I also bear in mind that from a historical point of view, manifestos have always contained elements of fundamentalism.

Marx’s Communist Manifesto, Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto, Breton’s Surrealist Manifesto, The Feminist Manifesto. All manifestos that in the end contained aggressive, revolutionary stances that wished to impose the new as something that rids us of the old.

There is no doubt that there is plenty of confusion nowadays. No certainty. But in order to find a new direction within this disorder we perhaps need even greater disorder, but better arranged, or just more convincing.

Yes, this is the point: maybe all that is required is a statement of purpose, perhaps a call for reflections rather than a call to arms.

And while we are discussing, John Huldt, “sketches” on a paper napkin the word, the metaphor that has already become the title of this new project Kaleidoscope. A wonderful project to which The Swedish School of Textiles at the University College of Borås is going to commit itself for the year to come.

For this call for thought, this public appeal to rethink the design ideal, here is my first humble “kaleidoscopic” contribution, my personal statement of intent. A first attempt at setting down a few considerations viewed through that timeworn object of wonder that I have used as a kind of telescope in order to catch my bearings.

**Premise**

Our learned ignorance.

Nikolaus Krebs (that translated into English would be read Nicholas Crab), born in 1401 in Cues, near Trier, is certainly the greatest Renaissance representative of platonic philosophy.

As all good Platonists he had a clear idea of the distinction between good and evil, between good and bad, between a good life and a bad life. And he also knew that evil is simply the negation of good. When I say “evil” I should say “not good”, when I say “bad” is should say “not good”. It is thanks to this ability that today, in this new universalist and localist middle age, his point of view can come to our rescue.

In his most important work *De docta ignorantia*, “Nicholas the Crab” tackles the problem of how man can know the world that surrounds him. And he reaches the conclusion that man will never be able to grasp absolute truth: man can only know relative truths, and these may increase, but never coincide with the absolute.

This principle is astounding because it establishes a dynamic relationship with a point of view regarding the tangible world: a relationship that is valid (though perhaps not absolutely) for everything, from the simplest of objects to the most abstract idea.

The glasses with which Cusanus regards the world have two lenses, one that draws things nearer and one that distances them, this is the only way that to this day we can hope to find a true gauge, a fundamental element for evaluation and decision making.

For example we cannot establish in absolute terms what a design for a good life might be, but we can certainly decide what is not design for a good life.

From the comparison between the useful and the useless, between the good and the bad, between what is decent
and what is indecent we perhaps can draw close to the truth without ever reaching it. And that's the good thing about it, because only in this way can life, beyond ending, also have an end, an aim. The rest is fundamentalism, dogmatism, intolerance.

Having said this let us now try to build together a first possible definition of what our Kaleidoscope project might bring to light.

**What is Kaleidoscope?**

**Kaleidoscope: the metaphor of beauty**

The three Greek words that form the English 19th C. neologism are: KALOS = beautiful; EIDOS = figure; SKOPEO = gaze.

This last Greek term, skopeo, is also the root of the Italian word scopo meaning purpose, aim, objective.

The kaleidoscope is an optical device that provides infinite permutations of forms and colours. A marvellous combinatorial machine. The marvel of anyone constantly looking at new forms, and yet always similar, in order to look at something beautiful.

The shapes are may, millions and millions, but for the "scope machine" the object is… beauty.

Just like a kaleidoscope design projects (from the latin: projectum = to throw forward)… a reflection of beauty.

1st reflection:
*Kaleidoscope is therefore a public appeal for reflections that invites us to design and see beauty.*

**Kaleidoscope: the metaphor of diversity**

The kaleidoscope creates through disruption. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope thus suggest the opportunity for designing an infinite number of projects beginning with a few simple and small elements.

I see a marvellous shape! And again! And here’s another! The shape breaks up in order to form another shape that retains a similarity with the previous one through its very difference.

This is the marvel of looking for an aesthetic/ecstatic purpose. The ecstasy of beauty looks at the similarities it finds in every small difference.

We now know that diversity is a heritage that must be protected for the sake of everyone’s cultural growth. Because diversities communicate, while identities remain dumb.

Today it is essential that we find a constructive way of coexisting.

The key word in this regard is “relation”, design for the sake of relationships and not for it’s own sake alone, because while ideological dogmatism could make do with strict bureaucratic protocols, the relative nature of relation requires the free flow of communication.

While ideology in terms of market structure meant immobility, obedience, superficiality and hypocrisy, relationship not only implies the possibility of exchange, but also to contest, to inquire and to criticize.

2nd reflection
*Kaleidoscope is therefore an appeal for public reflections that calls us to design/see beauty through the game of difference and similarity.*

**Kaleidoscope: the metaphor of judgement**

The composition game played with the shapes in the kaleidoscope is not neutral. There are as it happens combinations that are more successful than others and the assessment through which we establish that one combination is more beautiful, more fascinating or righter than another requires considerations that are true for any form of judgement.
A judgement need not be necessarily formulated through words. Every usage, purchase or consumer may for example already be considered a non verbal form of judgement. The subjectivity of “every man to his taste” is the result of a judgement, not of the mechanism that triggers this same assessment.

Tom might find attractive what Nick and Harry find ugly, but the mechanism through which they all reach their opposite conclusions is the same.

They look, they ponder, they compare, they judge, they desire, they use, consume, buy or don’t buy.

Taking into consideration any kind of object we may come up with a general principle (for example by establishing that is attractive, good, useful, innovative, or the contrary, that is to say bad, useless, obsolete and so on) and this assessment helps us to construct our way of “appearing”, our outer world, as well as our inner world, our way of “being”, our weltanschauung, our view of the world.

3rd reflection:
*Kaleidoscope is therefore an appeal for public ideas that require us to design/see beauty through the juxtaposition of difference and similarity and offers us a common procedure through which we may also reach divergent conclusions.*

**Kaleidoscope: the metaphor of goodness**

Like any other device however even thought must steer a course, because if it moves in all directions the capacity for judgment is likely to fall into untold contradictions.

And the course to steer for beauty is also that which is good, and good not just in individual terms, but also in terms of social responsibility.

I may consider an object desirable, but if this desire leads to social damage then that beauty that attracted me wilts immediately.

4th Thought
*Kaleidoscope is therefore an appeal for public ideas that require us to design/see beauty through the juxtaposition of difference and similarity and offers us a common procedure through which we may reach divergent conclusions that in any case point us towards goodness.*

**Kaleidoscope: a metaphor of the rules of freedom**

All games have rules one must abide by: social rules, shared rules that guard the portals of the temple of beauty, diversity, judgment and goodness.

The rules of the kaleidoscope are natural rules that differ from those of a program or a manifesto in which one establishes what has to be done.

They are rules that establish what we mustn’t do, that lay down good practice principles without in any way fettering the freedom of the project itself.

Just like when we drive round any city we are aware that we are not forced to go in any particular direction, but we are warned that that direction is forbidden and it is compulsory to take another one.

In the same way the designer has freedom of movement on condition that he abide by a sort of code made up right and wrong ways forward.

To transgress this code thus becomes an individual choice, a possibility that cannot however become a rule.

In recent times design has all too often taken transgression as a rule and thus the chaos in the design field has become unbearable. Kaleidoscope shall therefore try and establish a few, clear “NO’s!” and a the equivalent number of clear “Yes’s!”

5th reflection:
*Kaleidoscope is therefore an appeal for public thoughts that calls us to design/see beauty through the game of*
difference and similarity and offers us a common procedure through which we may reach divergent conclusions that in any case point us towards goodness and it should finally suggest the few simple rules that may ensure the freedom of the project.

A first kaleidoscopic composition

Here then is the first appeal for thought, a few suggestions, that I would like to pass on to those engaged in the project.

Colour

Let’s take a look at colour with the eyes of light. Let’s break them down, combine them, let’s follow the suggestions of our whim or our heart, but let us not forget that the world has its own palette of colours that has a symbolic function: green is the lawn, blue is the sky, deep blue is the night, yellow is the sun overhead, veering to orange at sunset, pink are dawn’s fingers, red the heart of the hearth, black is soot and so on.

Clearly these are just symbolic meanings and every combination must answer for its actions, including extreme ones, that always run the risk of being the last.

The symbolic significance of colours is very strong and if the happiness of colourfulness exceeds a certain threshold it turns into madness, if the seriousness of black overcomes all, it shrouds all in mourning.

Grey is fine, but if all is grey, no amount of pills will cure your depression.
White is innocent, but white can upset the mind.

The forest is green but if all is green it means I’m looking at the surgeon lying on the operating table.
The game can go on forever and there are clearly no rules, but the fact remains that every colour carries with it certain qualities and these qualities must be carefully balanced in terms of quantity.

The edges.

The world, or mundus as the Latins called it, is the square furrow traced by Romolus to outline the foundations of the city, the house, the home. Interfering with that kind of regularity, as Remus tried to do, is not such a trifling matter.

There is no doubt that invention must always provide the opportunity for provocation, but if provocation becomes overwhelming and my world looses all its structure and the “cutting edge” rules over everything, then I’m in trouble. It’s like too much salt or chilly pepper in the soup, a skew-whiff nightmare, Murnau’s expressionism that decks out the world of Dracula.

An edge is always aggressive, and the sharper it gets the more it can do harm.

Looking at the acute angle of the arrow man always feels a little like a victim and a prey.

Depth/thickness

Depth is often associated with an expanding meaning, while thickness seems to imply the reverse, a kind of wall against which all meaning is lost. A surface that cannot be explored further.

The fabric

The warp and weft of a fabric are the characteristics that let the essence of fabrics clothe our lives, become our second skin. In the same way as the skin is in actual fact the most essential organ of our body (and the first to be produced in the fetus), so the fabric of our world is a structural cornerstone, the material that has the closest relationship to our skin, to the skin of others, to the skin of the constructed environment in which we live.
Its nature, its performance cannot always take second place compared to its shape, its cut, its outline, its decoration and decorum.
By choosing one fabric as opposed to another we are making a value judgment, we are showing our respect for man, for the environment, for human creativity.

The fake

We learn to distinguish between innocent falsehoods and real lies.

Watch out for fake wood, fake leather, fake stone, fake silk... because if this choice conceals the danger of things alike no longer being in tune with those they resemble then we are performing a swindle, living a lie.

If however there are ecological reasons for our choice, then the pretence becomes an acceptable role played in the wings of the great theatre of the world.

At times the fake is also what propels and celebrates the real, just like fake Louis Vuitton bags made the fortune of the brand.

The small falsehoods rekindle our sense of truth. While lies confuse us and we get the wrong end of the stick, we call peace war and love death, democracy dictatorship.

There is no possible identity in a world that tolerates lies as a method.

Ornamentation

Ornamentation is certainly not a crime, but centuries and styles have been buried by decoration and over-decoration.

When decoration becomes a superficial obsession, the great void, the inability to look at the soul of objects, at their inner qualities, when design no longer designs, but just stirs the porridge of superficial appearance then we are overcome with a sense of sickness when confronted with objects that fall victims of the so aptly named sickliness of over decoration, of supposedly ironic invention.

The same is true of cosmetics when it is entrusted to the superficial and skin deep actions of make up and aesthetic surgery.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity requires a complete separate chapter, because culture cannot be created following the tourist’s timetable.

If we so wish we may freely draw on the heritage of different cultures, for pleasure or necessity, out of interest or for the sake of amusement on condition that we maintain an awareness of the fact that we are taking advantage of a heritage that is now pooled together for the common good and that our attitude towards these different cultures bears witness to the high regard in which we hold it.

When we use a colour scheme or ethnic motif out of context one must therefore remember the inverted commas.

Sometimes one must also be prepared to identify completely with the culture and consequently interpret it, getting to understand it thoroughly, otherwise it has the same effect as a tattoo on the body of a Maori, where it inspires fear and respect, while on the arm of a hooligan little it’s more than a worrying parody.

Good design.

A good life is not possible without experiencing a touch of evil and the same is true of good design that must contain at least a touch of bad design.

Just think of a house in which all the objects are lined up like little form-function soldiers, a home where there is no trace of useless knickknacks. Or think of a world where we are forced to wear the same uniform, practical, plain, yet functional. Sounds like a nightmare.

If form and function are raised to the level of dogma its precepts pitch into a abysmal uselessness.
By the same token if I have every object designed by a post-modern designer or a joke designer we would end up staring at a nail in the wall in order to savour a hint of peace and beauty. And if every outfit were designed by a late-gothic-contemporary fashion designer, all drapery, velvets and damask fabrics... we would by contrast be driven to mix with nudist sects.

Tolerance and balance, indulgence and coherence are attitudes of the mind and of taste that put us in a position to understand and interpret, both individually and collectively, what is good and what is bad design.

**The functional design**

By concentrating on the functional aspects of the object the designer helps the object to express its own nature, it forces it to speak out, to describe itself.

During the days of rationalism the most correct approach to designing an object was one that exploited and communicated as clearly possible the object’s functional purpose.

To some extent, thanks to the work of the “form follows function” designers, the object could state its case, give voice to its identity, find its own place in the world of things.

In actual fact however the modern design of the 60ies and 70ies that represented the myth of rationality applied to the world of design, produced objects that are now very sought after in antique markets.

So the results of the titanic efforts of the 20th C. rationalists are now closeted in collectors cabinets.

The rational approach, when all is said and done, carries with it too much ideology, too much conceptualisation, too many of the prejudices of the well-off post war classes and cannot aspire to supremacy.

Now functional design is in a difficult situation: the gradual flattening out of expressive possibilities. The oppression of the functional dogma reduces design to stereotypes beyond which there is nothing left beyond pure and simple repetition.

The formal limitations imposed by rationalist worship, the prison represented by so called pure form, have forced designers to provide constantly changing solutions to the same problem, and so functional designers have lost themselves in the bad infinity of the theme with variations.

Just like all tales, rationality, in order to continue exerting its charm, must therefore turn to the evocative power of the fairy tale, to new issues, to the enchanting power of myth.

**The design of the postmodern suk and designing the new.**

Mature markets are increasingly tending towards the oriental models of the suk and the bazaar. We started off with supermarkets and we ended up with supersuks... and then we say Orientals copy us!

The ideal nodes of exchange in the post-modern era are those places that are already conceptually suited for listing, for cataloguing, those places that have a natural inclination for the virtual online market, where one can find everything and its reverse, where rationality is not even a selling point, where rationalism shall be increasingly less representative and shall stands out as a surviving specimen that has undergone a severe identity crisis.

The age of multimedia and post-modern communication, just as we have lived it up till now, loves novelty, and cares little whether it is substantial or just apparent.

Perhaps one should here begin a digression on the life cycles of objects and the tendency for the market to use design as a way of packaging products with a rapidly declining quota of innovation, more ephemeral and subject to the whim of fashion and the inventions of trends.

But let us not forget that “The whole in the whole becomes Nothing” (Nikolaus Cusanus). Every tendency towards arrogant totality thwarts every opportunity of orientation.
In the gigantic Mall that surrounds all goods, despite the efforts of designers and communication experts, the products often remain dramatically dumb. Incapable of establishing a relation with the purchaser... they are a little fearsome.

In this regard, one should not underestimate the inflationary effect of novelty for novelty’s sake that is the cause of market stagnation, or rather the reactions of refusal, accompanied by nostalgic behaviour.

Novelty hyped day in day out gives rise to an inflationary effect that brings value back to the old ways, loaded with nostalgia and, occasionally, with prejudice.

A recurrent example of this is the myth of “tradition”, the so called good things of the times long gone, seen as evidence of a golden age, the age of the fathers, a kind of magical age capable of stemming the frenzied search for novelty.

The design of needs

It is clear, from a theoretical point of view, that the result of the designers’ work is correct only in so far as it provides a correct interpretation of the consumer’s needs filtered and translated by a sure-handed project culture.

This passive, yet professional designer attitude, someone who gets on with his job and that’s it, today no longer has carries much sense, because a large part of the needs are nowadays unreal. Even though they may sound like psychological necessities, it is these very needs that nowadays are artificial.

The postmodern consumer has an absolute need to renew not just the products on the market, but also ones own consumer motivations, one’s own needs. If in one instance he chooses the “need” for sobriety, nothing can ensure that a few hours later he may not opt for bad taste, provided that in this age where kitsch has become an aesthetically dominant subject it still makes any sense making these distinctions.

At this point there are two ways forward, the consumer oriented designer will try in any case to provide a solution to a real or imaginary demand.

The designer will take on the needs of the consumer, and shall tell himself the tale that the object is “exactly what the consumer desires”. At this point he will come up with the form that may best suit this need for air conditioning, for cleanliness, light, fashion, communication, consolation, entertainment and so on.

The market oriented designer on the other hand will be tempted to provoke a need, to trigger a need...actually...to design a need by suggesting desirable uses and lifestyles. Simple, instead of satisfying a need like the consumer-oriented designer does, the marketing designer comes up with the new desire.

In both cases what comes into play at this time is the expressive and poetic ability of the designer.

If the designer is able to transfer a personal thought, an original creative idea into his project, then the object shall have a soul, otherwise it is the fake creativity of those that conform to fashions and follow trends and fluxes without carrying out any sort of actual personal stylistic research.

This is the only element that can make the project become a leading player, the only aspect that may trigger a real form of novelty and bring on a new way of consuming and be just a rhetorical marketing expedient.

The design of designers

Today the designer finds himself operating in fields that were previously not his own.

Torn away from the protective security of his ancient role, on the edge between craftsman and artist, the industrial designer has shifted from being an industrial designer to a becoming a strategic designer. A sort of joker who makes consumer products, marketing culture and information.
The designer is a designer, but he is also architect, urban planner, fashion designer, manager, marketer, trend setter, artist, director, entrepreneur, philosophers, ethnologist.

This mixture of roles, typical of this post-modern age has overrun certain professions, however for the designer the phenomenon is more acute and perhaps the time has come to provide the designer with a new and more appropriate status for a profession that includes many others.

**The seriousness**

Let us not forget a kind of seriousness that is not the negation of joy, but rather the awareness that every rude gesture inflicted on the world is returned to us in the form of a loss of meaning.

**Fashion**

Fashion is a great thing. Fashion innovates, plays down, gives the times their flavour, adds lightness and playfulness to everything.

Fashion delves into the vices and virtues of the times and gives the days, encounters, flirts and ceremony their particular hue.

Fashion clothes and in so doing reveals the characters, the intuitions, the points of view, the opinions.

Fashion is the poetry of fabrics, colours, plots that are told during the seasons of the year and of existence.

Fashion distances death through a continuous ritual of innovation and discovery.

Fashion however runs a dangerous risk when it becomes just fashion.

When fashion rather creating fashion, contemplates fashion in a silly and repetitive way, then it gets stuck and dies of boredom like Narcissus at the spring of Echo.

When it basks in its own light and turns to ice, and all the furrows dug by the tears of time show up on its beautiful cheeks that won’t tolerate lamps or liftings.

When fashion goes out of fashion, a fashion designed purely for the runway, designed for newsflashes and magazines, fashion then dies in a short winter.

Fashion can never stop, that is true, but in its furious race it must never lose sight of the kind of happiness to be found in a light-hearted, pointless, unselfconscious gesture.

When fashion is dominated by the ruthless dictates of the market, and emphasis becomes the norm, fashion designers begin to worry and start to think, unaware that fashion is not about thought, but about gesture: tender, aggressive, seductive or forbidding gestures.

Beneath its constantly changing surface, fashion hides a stable essence that concerns the ethos of a people and of a culture.

It is therefore no surprise that fashion, in times of globalisation, is unrestrained, boundless and lacking in style. There is nothing worse than a global fashion, while if there is a quality that makes fashion great it is lightness and origi/ality.

Fashion safeguards traditions, when it reinterprets in its own way the spirit of a community: when it is curious it learns and imports, when it becomes more thoughtful it rediscovers in order to cover and defend.

Fashion is a system of signifiers that as such must keep watch on meaning, otherwise it becomes rhetorical and miles of cloth can be swallowed up by the rhetoric of fashion, whole armies of looms.

Every culture is capable of defending its particular qualities when its made of good cloth and the thread of invention is not lacking with which to weave new costumes and traditions.
Last but not least: relationship design

Great importance must finally be attributed to relationship design through communication and the use of the media.

Nowadays it is essential to find a constructive way of co-existing by exchanging information, points of view, attitudes, dreams.

The key word to this end is “relationship”, meaning the design for communication and no longer design for design, because while ideological dogmatism could make do with rigid bureaucratic protocols, the relative nature of relationships requires the free flow of information.

It is unthinkable, unless one wants to be relegated to small market niches, that the product can improve if the quality of information doesn’t improve with it and whoever designs the communication must be aware of the educational or harmful power he wields.

Conclusion

Now I feel I have unearthed what to me is the real soul of the Kaleidoscope project, a “Good Design, for a Good Life”. It essentially has to do with designing the relationships that we managed to establish with the other inhabitants of our planet and with ourselves. A relationship based on the thought, the joy, the seriousness with which we manage to communicate our common goal, our shared beautiful visions.

And let’s not forget the “Cues Crab”, he who suggested the concept of learned ignorance to attempt to draw close to the infinite goodness of God, an idea that when summed up in English sound very good: a good life is a God life!