New Nordic and Scandinavian Retro: reassessment of values and aesthetics in contemporary Nordic design

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Abstract
The “New Nordic” label has spread in the design world since 2005, but it is quite difficult to distinguish from the image of “Scandinavian Design” and the heritage of values and aesthetics from the 1950s. Many designer statements and promotional texts are eager to mention both designations. This survey sketches the background and asks, “What is ‘New’?” and “What is ‘Nordic’?” with a focus on the Danish firm Muuto, which has been a central actor in establishing the term “New Nordic Design.” We focus on the interplay between the storytelling around the products and designers on webpages and in marketing, popular literature, etc., and the actual design objects. Reoccurring themes from the 1950s are how it relates to nature and climate, social models of welfare and equality, and pure, minimalist forms. They are, however, more present in the high expectations of an international audience and in promotions than in the objects themselves. The new products of Nordic Design are close to the current international neo-modernism in the form of digitally designed and industrially produced items in often thought-provoking minimalist forms and are directed at an elitist, international audience that wants to engage with these demanding aesthetics and the ideal picture of Nordic cultures— as a nice design and gourmet destination. New Nordic Design shows that the image and ideals of Scandinavian Modern are still living, as a subtle version of Scandinavian Retro, a reimagination of the lifestyle and values of Scandinavian Modern.

Keywords: Scandinavian Design; Nordic identity; design values; neo-modernism; minimalism

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With the designation “New Nordic,” design from the Nordic countries has once again entered the international scene as a broad trend in the last 10 years. This is part of a general fascination for “Nordic Cool” discussed in this volume that seems to be fuelled by different global, political, and economic trends and the reactualisation of the Nordic welfare states as historical role models. In the 1950s and 1960s, design products for domestic interiors, from furniture to kitchenware, from Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and, on rarer occasions, Iceland, had great international success as “Scandinavian Design.” This regional brand was not least consolidated by the grand travelling exhibition, Design in Scandinavia, 1954–1957, in North America, where Finland, a bit confusingly, was included under this label without being part of Scandinavia in the strict geographical definition. But Finland is part of “Norden” and was invited to the political and cultural collaboration in the Nordic Council that was established in the 1950s. In markets such as the UK, the USA, and Germany, the Scandinavian Modern style was praised as a modern, functional design with a human touch and as a more subtle modernisation of traditional values than the international style of Central European modernists.

Though many items from that period are now praised as “classics,” Scandinavian Modern went out of fashion in the late 1960s. The Cooper Hewitt Museum exhibition, Scandinavian Modern Design 1880–1980 in New York in 1982, was definitely looking at past glory, despite the attempt of the authors of the catalogue to re-invoke the inherent ideals and values. However, in the late 1990s, the interest in Scandinavian Design rose again, and it was partly fuelled by a renewed appreciation of modernist design icons or classics, partly by a retro cult of mid-century modern. Retro, meaning the fascination of a “recent past” revived in collective memory through both clothing and home design items, had developed from countercultural statements in the 1960s to becoming mainstream around 1990. And with its huge, international success, Scandinavian Modern was part of the period style of the 1950s, though some items stayed in production as “classics.” This means that the current wave of New Nordic Design grows out of or is, at least, interwoven with new receptions of “timeless” design classics, as well as trends of Scandinavian Retro.

New Nordic Design must be seen as (part of) a lifestyle trend, where the designed items represent accessories for the good life of a conscious citizen with personal surplus for the practicality of smart details, authentic values or environmental concerns. It often consists of minimalist gadgets or small luxuries for everyday life, though of course it offers the whole package of a Nordic interior—or personal lifestyle. This is similar to the earlier wave in the 1950s:

Far from representing a cross section of Nordic design culture, the products promoted under the catchphrase—or brand—“Scandinavian Design” formed a particular and carefully orchestrated blend of gourmet objects selected from a very narrow segment of the region’s design practice.

Just like Scandinavian Design in the 1950s, the products are today predominantly domestic items. And despite ideals of environmental or social concern, New Nordic is seldom associated with other Nordic designs, like outdoor equipment, ergonomics, participatory design, or the reverse vending machine for bottle recycling that the Norwegian design historian Kjetil Fallan has included as editor in his “alternative histories” from 2012.

Life Style inspiration from the Muuto Homepage with the caption: “Choose natural wood and white tones for a Nordic Dining experience.” (Muuto.com).

New Nordic Design seems foremost to be tokens of a dream picture of the Nordic countries as harmonious societies in balance with nature and
history; the lucky peoples who are one with both their own culture and environment and on the top of the world! The picture of the geographical region of “Norden” is a crucial part of the brand of New Nordic that also performs as a “design destination” for tourist and creative professionals: A nice place to go (and shop), where the locals seem to afford and care for design and aesthetics in every aspect, even in the public sector. In the post-war period, the Nordic welfare states were pictured like this and were praised as the harmonious middle way between the evils of the cold war. Politically, the nice pictures of social welfare and cultural values seem at present to be cracking, at least for some, not least in Danish restrictions on immigration and social security:

Whereas the Nordic countries used to provide model alternatives to both totalitarian systems and raw capitalism, the current state of affairs sets the Nordic states—and their Middle Way—as a disturbing example of other possible roads into the twenty-first century globalized world.

However, when it comes to design, international society still wants, or even needs, this dream picture and its ideals.

This investigation of New Nordic Design has its main focus on the Danish firm Muuto, which was one of the first firms to use the label “New Nordic” as part of its brand and as the framework for its design strategy. We pick up statements both by the firm and its associated designers, as well as other contemporary Nordic firms and designers, on the characteristics, meanings, and values of their products. Sources are their homepages and the interview-based trend survey New Nordic Design by Dorothea Gundtoft, 2015. We ask “What’s ‘New’?” and “Why ‘Nordic’ as an alternative to ‘Scandinavian’ in current years?” We focus on three reappearing themes of nature, societal models, and minimalist aesthetics. These three aspects were also featured in mid-century Scandinavian Design, and with the background of this parallel, we want to characterise the aesthetics and discourse of New Nordic. It is worth discussing clichés and scrutinising ideals, even if the marketing and consumption of New Nordic Design certainly do more for the image of the Nordic countries than toward changing consumer habits, not to say fixing political crises or environmental challenges.

NEW

If you read the current appraisals of Scandinavian Design classics, you tend to believe that they were never out of fashion; that they are truly “timeless.” But international sales dropped around 1970, and the agendas among Nordic designers gradually changed. The catalogue of an exhibition by the Danish group Spring in 1995 featured an attack on the boring timelessness of Danish Design: “[…] I do look forward to the day Stelton no longer sells, when no-one is interested in producing Arne Jacobsen’s Myren [the Ant] and the last worn Wegner chair is put in a museum […].” The designers put action behind their words and demolished a Wegner Wishbone chair with a chainsaw. Ironically, however, only a few years later, consumer interest in Jacobsen and Wegner accelerated once again.

The new situation was the changed reception of both the aesthetics and the values of Scandinavian Modern in the late 1990s and an international neo-modernism in new products and interiors. In 2003, the Norwegian design historian Espen Johnsen scrutinised “Northern Minimalism and Neomodernism.” Through interviews with young designers from Norway, Sweden, and Finland, he discussed the return of elements of the modernist idiom, either as neo-minimalism or an updated supermodernism using new technologies. This return of modernist idioms was, however, followed by postmodern reservations to modernist ideology, as the designers rather wanted to make twisted or ironic versions of international modernism, Scandinavian Modern or the aesthetics of minimalist object art of the 1960s. In particular, the group Norway Says expressed a loose relation to the earlier generations and, despite their name, felt more related to the contemporary trend of neo-minimalism in the UK, the Netherlands, and Italy in the 1990s. As Norway was less famous for design in the Golden Days, the name, Norway Says, provoked international curiosity. Despite the initially ironic or strategic reasons to pick this name, the designers have since expressed a closer relation to Norway and the Scandinavian tradition in design, as stated in the catalogue for their 10-year anniversary exhibition. During the same years, Norway has experienced the growth of a home market for Norwegian design, hitherto not existing, for both new products and the re-launch of older “classics.”
If this has been the new situation in Norway, by contrast the Danish designers tended to consider the strong tradition and the many famous historical names as a shadow to escape. Denmark was less represented in the international neo-minimalism of the 1990s, but international figures like Jasper Morrison and the magazine Wallpaper in their early days pointed to Danish modern as inspiration. After 2000, however, Danish designers like Louise Campbell, Cecilie Manz and Ole Jensen were internationally acclaimed for neo-modern design and came to represent a new generation.

Alongside the designers, it is just as important to mention firms and producers. In the Swedish furniture industry, Källemo featured young, postmodern designers early on, and in 1995 IKEA introduced the designer collection, IKEA PS, with a focus on young Swedish designers. The British scholar Susan Howe interpreted the early PS collections as often quirky, postmodern reinterpretations, blending Scandinavian Modern, and international modernism. This mix is close to the label “neo-modernism.” Today the PS collections can be seen as part of New Nordic Design, but are seldom mentioned, because IKEA’s global activities seasoned with Swedish vernacular produces an identity of its own. But the recipe of clever, simple, and practical objects with new designer names lies behind New Nordic as well.

More directly associated with New Nordic are producers that got their international success with products by new designers such as Swedese. And most significant is perhaps the new kind of commercial actors like Normann Cph, Gubi, and Muuto in Denmark without production facilities, who pick designers and designs in different homeware categories to launch under their brand label, but with a strong emphasis on the designer names, statements and portraits. These kinds of firms can be identified as “editors” of design, as described in the case of Normann Cph, and this fits the strong Nordic presence of “signature design” since 2000. Both phenomena have been known internationally since the 1980s, but have paved the way for and shaped the expansion of New Nordic. Where designers earlier could work for decades with one manufacturer specialising in one material or production technology, like wooden furniture or home textiles, the role of the design editor is the exact opposite, asking designers to do something in unfamiliar product categories or surprising materials, like architect towels or furniture designer candles. This gives very diverse offerings of singular homeware gadgets, which invites consumers to search for designer names or brands rather than product style. This way of building up a product line has made it possible for these design editor firms to start up with home accessories and later get a foothold in the more prosperous and prestigious furniture design market. But the blurry categories also mean that more mainstream brands, such as Menu, Hay, Bolia, and Boconcept in Denmark, perform likewise, with a growing focus on designer names.

Due to this, a new design culture has taken shape, where a new generation of designers and new kinds of firms are acting with the background of a new, retro, or neo-modern reception of Scandinavian Design. But it still leaves the question, what is actually new in the design itself, when the heritage from Scandinavian Modern is still lurking behind it? Some firms speak of a “new chapter,” but that emphasises history, with only vague clues to a new plot. If we listen to Nina Bruun from Muuto, they offer an example:

For us, Nordic design means “New Nordic,” which is all about adding a new chapter—essentially building on our design heritage […] A good example is our Cover chair. The starting point was a typical Scandinavian armchair, but by taking a “New Nordic” approach, we added a thin, pressed plywood wraparound veneer, which not only functions as a comfortable armrest, but is also the mechanism that holds the chair together.
semi-circular armchair in beech. It is a technological twist to use the enforced plywood veneer in this way, but challenging and underlining the transparent construction and offering a quite puritan “comfort” seems very close to the values of Scandinavian Modern. Many similar marketing statements seem to mix references to “Nordic” and “Scandinavian” redundantly, because the latter might still be the most well-known abroad, so what is most significantly new is the introduction of the word “Nordic” as an alternative to the still highly esteemed “Scandinavian.”

NORDIC

Due to the renewed interest in Scandinavian Design in the late 1990s, a number of publications on the topic where released in the first years of the new millennium, ranging from historically oriented coffee table books to camouflage product catalogues from shops specialising in Scandinavian Design. At that time the concept of Scandinavian style or lifestyle seemed to be dominating. From the launching of Muuto under the concept of New Nordic in 2006, to the exhibition New Nordic—Architecture and Identity at Louisiana in 2012, there was however a significant shift in the terminology with the effect that the term “Nordic” today seems to be the automatic choice for publications and exhibitions regarding design, art, and architecture.

This shift in terminology seems to be related to the success of the New Nordic Kitchen, with the restaurant Noma opening in 2003 and the launching of the New Nordic Kitchen Manifesto in 2004. The concept of New Nordic food was quickly taken up by the Danish government and the Nordic Council of Ministers, giving the term an official backing. Co-founder of Muuto, Kristian Byrge is today also co-owner of Noma, and Muuto can be seen as a way of transferring the concept from food into design. The New Nordic Kitchen Manifesto states that the goal is “to express the purity, freshness, simplicity, and ethics we wish to associate with our region.” It seems that an interesting circle is at play here. The New Nordic food has introduced locally grown ingredients, like ramson or sea buckthorn, that have neither been part of the industrialised and globalised modern food culture, nor the pre-industrial traditional Danish food. Instead the food culture has been recast in the image of a set of regional values. And these values of purity, simplicity, and ethics are actually quite close to those normally attributed to Scandinavian Design and architecture, illustrating how values and images may travel back and forth between different cultural areas with the effect of reinforcing each other.

If we look at Muuto’s description of themselves, they thus attach a similar set of values to the Scandinavian Design tradition:

Muuto is rooted in the Scandinavian design tradition, characterised by enduring aesthetics, functionality, craftsmanship and an honest expression.

By expanding this heritage with forward-looking materials, techniques and bold creative thinking, our ambition is to deliver a new perspective on Scandinavian design.

As values do, they include their own set of countervales. Scandinavian Design is authentic as opposed to superficial (honest functionality), it transcends the fluctuations of fashion (enduring aesthetics) and represents a subtle modernisation that has preserved traditions and values of craftsmanship, as opposed to a more radical modernist celebration of industrial design. What is actually at play is exactly the positioning of Scandinavian Design as the “middle way” between the fast superficiality of capitalist pop culture and the “cold inhumanity” of Central European modernism that was established in the 1950s during the Golden Age of Scandinavian Design.

According to the statement, this tradition should not be celebrated as a collection of historical design classics, but expanded and seen from a new perspective. Thus, there made an implicit differentiation between forms and values. The values of the tradition are best kept by the renewal of forms. “To change in order to preserve,” as the conservative saying goes. While the young generation of designers in the 1990s, as described earlier, was involved in an open rejection of tradition with the symbolic demolishing of “design classics,” the rhetoric might rather be termed now as “freedom through submission.” It is only by embracing the tradition that the designers can liberate themselves from its shadow. Space Architects express it this way:

The legacy of a heritage with such strong, iconic designs has been somewhat of an obstacle to moving on. But Nordic design is not about exact expression, shape or form. The aesthetics associated with it originate...
from a mindset indigenous to Scandinavia
or northern Europe. [...] This mindset is,
in our opinion, the essence of the new Nordic
design. It feels as though we are stepping out
of the shadows, and the wheels are turning
again.25

On the one hand, the design legacy is abstracted
into a certain mindset, which leaves the field of
solutions, forms, and aesthetic expressions open.
But on the other hand, this mindset is regionalised
in a way that positions Scandinavia as a cultural
region with a special potential for creativity and a
heightened level of aesthetic understanding.

Following these rhetorical figures of simulta-
neous continuity and renewal, New Nordic might
be considered a form of revivalism, like new gothic
or new classicism, where the ideological figure is
concerned with vitalising the living essence of a
tradition, rather than worshipping its “dead”
historical forms. The “New Perspective” evoked
in the preceding quotations is also quite literally the
meaning of the Finnish word “Muuto,” which was
chosen as the brand name.26 This name is a fine
illustration of the perplexities of the revivalist
notion of looking back in order to move forward
and the different layers of communication in the
cultural contexts of national and international
design. In an international context, Muuto has an
“exotic” Nordic ring to it and is easily connected to
other Nordic cultural phenomena, like Noma. In a
Danish context, the choice of a Finnish name
conceals its Danish roots and together with the
translated meaning, it underlines the break with the
tradition of Danish Design classics. Internationally,
“Nordic” with all the cultural imaginations con-
ected to it, is the important part; nationally, New
is the important part.

Thus, in the present situation, there might
primarily be opportunistic reasons for the semantic
shift from Scandinavian to Nordic, connected to
the success and political institutionalisation of New
Nordic food, as well as the phonetic “brand value”
of the concept. However, there are also historical
reasons why “Nordic” almost automatically seems
to inspire reflections on the connection between
nature, climate, history, and national identity,
while “Scandinavian” is more often followed by
references to the political values inherent in the
Scandinavian welfare systems. The Norwegian art
historian, Ingeborg Glambek, has made a thorough
investigation of the interpretation of the concept
“Nordic” by the public of different nations in their
reception of the large exhibitions of Nordic Design
and architecture during the first half of the 20th
century.27 She points out that in the period leading
up to the Second World War, there was a signifi-
cant difference in the interpretation of the term
“Nordic” by the German and the English-speaking
public. German critics focused on how the Nordic
closeness to nature, simplicity, and homeliness
could be seen as an expression of a specific cultural,
linguistic, or even racial identity that pointed
ward toward a shared, Germanic cultural background.
On the other hand, the English and American
reception interpreted Scandinavian Design and
architecture as an expression of a political ideal
that was mirrored in an everyday culture infused
with democratic and egalitarian values.28

It is obvious that these interpretations each have
specific political resonances, and it is equally
obvious why the American interpretation became
dominant in the period after the Second World
War, which might also explain the preference for
the term “Scandinavian” in the 1950s. According
to Glambek, Anglo-Saxon critics often used the
term “northern” in order to distance themselves
from the German “Nordic.”29 In an American
context, however, this was much less geographi-
cally and politically precise than “Scandinavian.”

The double focus on a shared national character
based on climate, landscape, and history on the
one hand, and a distinctive political model and a
set of shared democratic values on the other,
however remains as two parallel tracks that work
as an ideological framework for the interpretation
of the “New Nordic.”

NATURE

A connection between local nature and regional
style that gained new momentum with the emer-
gence of “critical regionalism” in the field of
architecture30 has turned into an almost standard,
repeated explanation of the distinctive character of
Scandinavian Design, often followed by a focus on
the pre-industrial roots of the Scandinavian Design
culture. In Skandinavisk Design. Klassisk og moderne
skandinavisk livsstil og dens betydning (2004) by
Ingrid Sommar, one of the books that caught up
on the renewed interest in Scandinavian Design
before it was framed under the concept of
“New Nordic,” she reflects on whether the present
tendencies could be seen as part of a new formation of a Scandinavian style and finds the answer not in the products themselves, but in the shared landscape and historical heritage:

There is no singular concept that unites the Scandinavians of today and—possibly—results in a distinctive style. What we share on the other hand is closeness to an unusually wild and beautiful landscape and roots in the Nordic cultural heritage with its simple, economical and useful design.\(^{31}\)

As shown, “New Nordic” was transferred from the New Nordic Kitchen, with its emphasis on sustainability and local natural resources, and not only do we rediscover the references to Nordic nature as standard figures in statements, but also in the visual framing of the products. It also seems that the issue of sustainability, with its critical view on the modern relationship between man and nature, has led to an even greater emphasis on the primitiveness and pre-modern roots of Nordic Design. In the introduction to Dorothea Gundtoft’s book on New Nordic Design from 2015, in line with the previous examples she evokes an image of Scandinavia as a culture, where design permeates all of society due to a combination of climate, landscape, and history:

Living in these volcanic, arctic, rainy, marine and mountainous landscapes has meant that its inhabitants have always had challenges to overcome. This, of course, led to a tradition of product design that has evolved to focus on usefulness and durability. Nordic designs are almost always geared towards practicality, taking into account the surrounding natural world and its resources. The peoples of Scandinavia come from a mostly agricultural background, and it is readily apparent that a heritage of fishermen and farmers, who relied on high-quality tools, is still deeply instilled in the Nordic DNA.\(^{32}\)

Here, a historical line is made from the landscapes and climatic conditions, through pre-modern professions concerned with mastering these natural conditions, to the present design culture. With the idea of a Nordic DNA inherited from our ancestors, it is even set in a language of biological metaphors.

Designer Søren Rose, working for Muuto, is even more specific in pointing out the influence of the climate on the character of New Nordic Design:

The result of a Nordic life with all 4 seasons is a seasonal culture with both extrovert and introvert periods. The dark and long winter leaves us inside our homes for a great amount of time, whereas the short but intense summer makes us spend as much time outside as possible. It all leaves us with high expectations to ALL our surrounding products. […] A Nordic product can look rather fragile and elegant on the outside but at a closer look it is rough as hell. It’s all in the detail!\(^{33}\)

A common feature of the two quotes is the figure of “the iron fist inside the velvet glove,” the tension between roughness and the harshness of the living conditions and the exterior elegance of the products.

An image of “Nordic Barbarians” is not new, but resonates with a conception of the Nordic in the beginning of the 20th century that, in line with Oswald Spengler’s vitalist conception of cultural history, depicts Nordic culture as young, vital, and future oriented, as opposed to the old, degenerated cultures of Central and Southern Europe.\(^{34}\) However, there seems to be a shift in the weighting. The Finnish pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris 1900 depicted bears and fishing nets, but this was in order to show the cultural feat in transforming these natural conditions into a civilised and artistically refined people.\(^{35}\) Today, the general figure is the same, but the argument is more or less reversed. It has become essential to show how there is a primitive vitality behind the cultivated surface. While keeping a modernist or neo-minimalist aesthetic expression, it is thus possible to frame the New Nordic within a cultural trend that seeks to establish a new closeness to nature by going back before the evils of modernity. Just as the New Nordic Kitchen has turned into “Stone Age Food,” there is also a rugged fisherman behind the minimalist surface.

**MODELS**

As shown, the rhetorical transformation of the Nordic or Scandinavian from a style to a mindset has been experienced as artistically liberating. Muuto explains what characterises this mindset as follows: “‘New Nordic’ also means that the Scandinavian mindset remains central in our founding principles. We produce democratic, social (as opposed to individual), affordable luxury. We want everyone to be able to afford our design.”\(^{36}\)
Here, the mindset is not an expression of the local nature, but rather a shared ethical attitude. This way, New Nordic is constructed as a continuation of the political values that we have seen were of such great importance in the American reception of Scandinavian Design in the 1950s. A common characteristic of Scandinavian Design is to label it “democratic,” as we have seen with IKEA’s line of “Democratic Design.” We like to be reflected in the image of the Scandinavian political model as being especially democratic, a notion grounded in the conception of Scandinavian society as a historical synthesis or “middle way.”

Kjetil Fallan attributes the present rise in the demand for Scandinavian Design in America to a renewed interest in the Scandinavian welfare model, in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008. Scandinaivia still evokes strong feelings of enthusiasm or dislike. With the historic collapse of communism, Scandinavia is no longer “the middle way,” though, but rather “the other way,” symbolising the desire for a political alternative to neoliberal capitalism besides religious fundamentalism.

In the preceding quotation, Muuto connects the Scandinavian democratic mindset with the term “affordable luxury.” This is a deliberate paradox since the traditional meaning of luxury is that which is desired by many, but accessible to few. The meaning seems to be that Scandinavian luxury is a subtle everyday surplus, rather than spectacular high-end products, which again reflects the equality and relatively small level of social stratification in Scandinavian societies. It also seems to imply that a gap between the taste of the cultural elite and the mainstream does not exist, at least not in the field of design, since contemporary design is allegedly appreciated by a mainstream audience, which the designers then see a moral obligation to address.

Whether in relation to aesthetic sensibility, or social equality and ethical values, a common figure seems thus to be the idea of Scandinavia as a single unified culture. In this way, we seem to fit Raymond Williams’ definition of culture as a “whole way of life,” which in the Danish tradition is mirrored in the notion of the theologian Hal Koch, who was an influential figure in the debate about democracy in the aftermath of the Second World War, that democracy should be understood not just as a political system, but as a “form of life.” In this way, democracy, everyday life and the things involved in our everyday practices become interlinked.

Politically, however, “the cultural gap,” as it was coined in the 1960s in Denmark, has been a strong dividing factor, which seems to have gained rather than lost importance. There is a paradox between the experience of cultural division felt in Denmark and Scandinavia in general and the image of cultural unity seen from the outside. In the American context, however, this image is evoked by a certain segment as a counterimage to their experience of cultural division. Jeff Werner notes at the end of his investigation of the branding of Volvo in America:

Of course there are always Americans who simply refuse to drive a car associated with snobbish Scandinavian design and Swedish welfare politics. But you can’t win them all. After all, Volvo may be the perfect car for a “latte-drinking, sushi-eating, New York Times-reading, Hollywood-loving” Democrat.

Andreas Engesvik, Engesvik By Hand tablecloth, Georg Jensen Damask 2014.

MINIMALISM

If we turn our attention from the rhetoric to the actual design of products marketed under the frame
of New Nordic, it might similarly be that they are not for everyone, but address a segment that finds subtle differentiation more ethical than the conspicuous consumption of demonstrative luxury. The minimalist style of Scandinavian Modern was thought by its designers to be accessible and democratically inclusive, because forms and constructions were easy to comprehend and items were light to handle; a no-nonsense bargain! But the minimalist aesthetics were often too austere and sophisticated in their abstract reductions, and the products turned out to be too demanding and elitist to most consumers. They had to be presented and mediated as part of a new, easier lifestyle to be a market success. In his book, *When Danish Furniture Became Modern*, 2006, the business historian, Per H. Hansen, has investigated the huge “network” in Denmark of architects, design teachers, journal editors, exhibition curators, design critics, manufacturers, salesmen, and public educators that promoted modern design and “taught” customers to love it. But the current, “tweaked functionalism,” as the Swedish group Form Us With Love labels the neo-modern approach on the Muuto homepage, often results in even more advanced or conceptually twisted versions of minimalism. Norwegian designer Andreas Engesvik, former partner of Norway Says, has made a squared, monochrome tablecloth for the Danish home textile manufacturer Georg Jensen Damask; just that simple? Well, let’s hear:

The simple hand drawing is a complicated case for the weavers, due to the uneven lines created by the pressure on the pencil. The result is a light, quiet and downplayed design, where the quality of the weaving nevertheless stands out.42

The very reduction opens a possibility for new dimensions of complexity to appear, here the differing pressure of the hand translated into unequal lines. The American minimalist Agnes Martin made whole canvases with closely drawn pencil stripes in the 1960s, where you had to get really close to experience their texture.43 This aesthetic might be accessible at some level, but the question is whether you get the point and share the intended experience.

The minimalist logic behind this reduction of the overall shape in order to make the perception of other aspects possible, that is, another complexity, was developed in modernistic design through the 20th century.44 Johnsen explains it in the case of Norway Says:

The foremost characteristics of Norway Says have been their capacity to always give their products a form that is simple and complex at the same time. Like the best examples of neo-minimalist furniture from a few years back, it is a question of reducing form without subtracting too much from function and comfort, but at the same time adding something advanced.45

“Less” turns out to be “more,” and he explains further: “Capturing the pure and simple form is regarded as a precondition for luring any viewer or consumer to consider other aspects of the product.”46 In this sense, the simple shape is to be understood as an invitation to further experiences of the product. But it is a demanding kind of aesthetic communication, and if it is thought to be democratically inclusive, it could only be as an intention to educate the consumer to higher aesthetic sensibility.

The reductive forms of neo-minimalist design lead the eye and body to experience innovative details of construction and material qualities such as textures and tactility, but the products often also feature more conceptual aspects, such as storytelling or a riddle-like name. Johnsen points to the British designer, Jasper Morrison, as the international pioneer of neo-minimalism. “Morrison’s furniture represented a bold simplicity with clear references to Scandinavian Design and a capability for imbuing his products with poetry and storytelling.”47 Another inspiration has been the Dutch Droog Design, known for its drastically simple, but often very ironic and impossible objects hovering in a grey zone between everyday use and pure meditation objects.48 New Nordic Design doesn’t go as far as Droog’s often offensively raw manufacture and provocative challenges for use. But inspirations at the conceptual level are obvious. An object like *Colour Lamp*, by Engesvik and the Norwegian light designer Daniel Rybakken, is a simple concept of three plates of colored glass leaning against the wall, which the user can arrange differently as a DIY art installation. Not very practical or useful, but highly engaging for the user!

While some of these designs have understated, neutral names, like *Colour Lamp*, others have more poetic or enigmatic names as hints to stories, or keys to the objects as quasi-works of art.
An inspiration could once again be Droog Design that started up with pieces like You Can’t Lay Down Your Memories, a chest of drawers by Remy Tejo, 1989. The pretentious titles are very widespread in New Nordic Design, from Hay’s About a Chair, designed by Hee Welling, to Muuto’s Everyday Holy, a mug by Ilkka Suppanen, and Same Same But Different, by Norway Says.

Norway Says, Same Same but Different, series of glasses, Muuto 2006.

The last name is an English idiom and refers to the three differently shaped water glasses in the set. They can be stacked differently, and the user can enjoy small variations in the everyday routines of table setting—and dish washing. It is a little piece of minimalist object art in an everyday setting, and either you judge it as trivialised artwork or as tweaked functionalism. To some customers, such puns and riddles might be inviting and provide catchy nicknames and keys to extra dimensions for the everyday objects. They invite storytelling, explanations, or personal interpretations by owners, gift donors, and shop assistants. But they will appear absurd and alienating to others who are not part of the aesthetic and linguistic games. The intention is to initiate small, quirky experiences in trivial routines and perhaps to produce a different awareness of situations, forms, materials, and objects as a low level entry to aesthetic consciousness. However, it demands a personal surplus, a high level of mental engagement, to decode this dimension of experience.

**CODA: SCANDINAVIAN MODERN REIMAGINED**

The new wave of Nordic Design is clearly part of an international trend, neo-modernism, and both products and communication are addressing an international market. Most names of firms or products are English (with Finnish names as the notable exception!) To some extent you could even argue that the Nordic identity of New Nordic Design has its script from international lifestyle media. Scandinavian Modern was similarly carried forward by the international trend of organic modernism in the post-war years. The great success of the traveling exhibition Design in Scandinavia, 1954–1957, which was mentioned earlier, seemed not least to be based on the basic picture of Scandinavian values, societies, and landscapes that was formulated by American journalists and curators active in the planning.49 It was a dream picture of Scandinavia, which the Scandinavian officials, writers, and designers were flattered by and reproduced with landscape photos and craft metaphors far from the industrial production of most of the items. This self-promotion turned into a kind of “self-exoticisation” of Scandinavian Design, which, at least in Denmark, went hand in hand with the self-understanding of the designers, that they had managed to preserve indiginous values of a unique, local design culture, that is, artistic refinement and crafts-based skills.50 And we still meet this self-exoticisation among Nordic designers and firms. Here is a tricky one from the Danish Design firm Norrmade:

Our Scandinavian ancestors travelled north. They discovered a landscape of forests and sandy beaches, with bright and mild summers but harsh winters. They learnt modesty, to save valuable resources and to always rely on their common sense. The Scandinavian design tradition was born out of necessity, a way of thinking handed down over generations. And it is a tradition that will always be in fashion, because we are all modern-day nomads—the world is our home. And in this mix of cultures, we find peace in the uncomplicated and joy in the simple and functional.51

Here, we have landscapes and ancestors, challenging climate and modesty, handing down a tradition—that luckily fits international fashion! The name “Norrmade” is derived from “Norrøn” (i.e. Old Norse) and “Made,” but here interpreted as “nomade” to bring it to the world. Throughout the 20th century, the division of “place” and “space” has been connected with political conflicts between conservative regionalism and internationalist humanism, a division that has been made
current by the present immigrant crisis. In this description, however, strong roots and humanist values are elegantly combined. It says as follows: “We have a deep-rooted history, but as nomads. We are, in this sense, all immigrants.” The identity of other Nordic firms might appear less arbitrarily constructed than this, but in picture settings and descriptions, styling and names the ingredients of self-exoticisation pop up. Design is a cultural phenomenon that seems to allow us to speculate legitimately about regional identity, in marketing as well as in self-presentation and popular literature.

What is new in this image of New Nordic? The co-branding of product and nation, even with regard to tourism, was already a part of the strategies in the 1950s,52 and shops like Illum’s, Den Permanente, Svenskt Tenn, and Tannum have received generations of tourists to the Scandinavian capitals. Perhaps our contemporary examples of New Nordic designer products perform an advanced aesthetic communication and highly demanding experiences, sometimes close to minimalist object art, suggesting that New Nordic addresses a somewhat narrower, more elitist segment of international consumers—with an interest in understated, “affordable luxury.”

A way of reading “New Nordic” could thus be to reassure an international audience that this is still Nordic Design. These new products still represent the old values of the Nordic countries and “the best of Scandinavian Design today.” All the statements we have consulted have insisted on there being a continuity in the values and qualities of Scandinavian Design, with beautiful everyday objects made accessible and practical to all users. And perhaps this process of being reassured is much needed, because international consumers on their own cannot see such new lines of “gourmet objects”53 as democratic goods. And as these industrially mass-produced items show traces of digital drawing and technological precision more than of rugged hands of fishermen or craftsmen, the idea of their roots being in Nordic culture and climate must be performed, staged or told in other ways.

What strike us as a significant change from Scandinavian Modern to New Nordic is that there is a quite different, professional “network” marketing the design and communicating the values. The institutionalised part of the design culture, design schools, museums, and professional journals, doesn’t play the same role in assuring the high cultural value of New Nordic. The main actors are, as mentioned, design firms acting as “editors,” picking designers with a good name or a good story, and they work closely with lifestyle media and bloggers. A firm like Muuto never uses conventional advertisements, but features in media that have a high status and the attention for advanced messages.

New Nordic Design contains nostalgia for the good old, modern days, where the shape and materiality of the singular objects of use were believed to change the scope of life. This longing might also explain why New Nordic as neo-modernism is often so close to Scandinavian Retro, which stages the same images, the same values. A significant feature of both, however, is the absence of a larger cultural project for the objects to be part of. Where modernism ideologically addressed the whole of society in its project to reflect and shape the potential of industrialism, New Nordic operates on an established market for industrialised goods, where modernism carries an established symbolic meaning.

Notes
7. See the chapter by Finn Arne Jørgensen in Fallan, op.cit.
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24. For another example of this tension see Paul Betts, The Authority of Everyday Objects. A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
26. This is the explanation of the firm. Dictionaries, however, only mention “muutos” meaning “change”
27. Ingeborg Glambek, op.cit.
28. Ibid., 137–138.
29. Ibid.
31. Sommar, Skandinavisk Design, 8. (Authors Translation).
35. Ibid., 30–31.
37. Sarah Hucai, “Scandi Crush Saga. How Scandinavian design took over the world,” Curbed, March 23, 2016, It seems at least that Denmark has had a prominent position in the recent campaigns for presidential nominations since it figured as a role model for the left-wing democratic candidate Bernie Sanders while the republican candidate Ted Cruz stated that his opponent Donald Trump was so unpredictable that there was a risk that he might decide to “nuke Denmark.”
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 61f.
49. Guldberg, “Scandinavian Design As Discourse.”
53. Fallan, Scandinavian Design, 3.