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Profiling Danish Design

Fashioning and Maintaining the Everyday as Aesthetic Brand

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Abstract

In furniture and household objects, Danish design has been renowned and even canonized for qualities regarding function, durability, craft, use of materials (e.g. wood), user-friendliness and values related to the uprising welfare society in the 1950s and 1960s, but also for balancing these qualities with an understated aesthetic expression. In this paper, we will open the discussion how it is possible to talk of a distinct aesthetic profile for Danish design. Building on aesthetics concepts applicable for analyzing the complexity of design on different levels (sensually, conceptually and contextually), we will look into how a position and profile for Danish design is constructed by aesthetic means in the exhibition Everyday Life – Signs of Awareness (2017.8.5-2017.11.5 at 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan). It is shown that the exhibition aestheticizes the design objects curated at the exhibition to confirm given notions of Danish design as simple, form-oriented, user-oriented, superbly executed in good materials and with a focus on the everyday. But at the same time, there are glimpses at the exhibition for trying to show how the objects are actual vehicles for an intensified everyday experience and for wider meaning potentials of the everyday life.

Introduction

In furniture and household objects, Danish design has been renowned and even canonized for qualities regarding function, durability, craft, use of materials (e.g. wood), user-friendliness and values related to the uprising welfare society in the 1950s and 1960s, but also for balancing these qualities with an understated aesthetic expression. This is most often attributed with a colloquial, but unprecise meaning of something appealing, pleasing or beautiful. Seen from abroad, “Danish Design” or “Danish Modern” was in its heyday often recognized for its peculiar aesthetic profile. With its current recurrence and rise to fashionability once again as “New Danish Modern” this has been done with a deliberate awareness of the brand qualities of this aesthetics.

In this paper, we will open for a discussion how it is possible to talk of a distinct aesthetic profile for Danish design. In its focus on Danish design, the paper is part of the preparation for a larger research project applied for at the Danish Research Council on “The Role of Aesthetics in Danish Design” where the purpose is to investigate how the aesthetic of Danish design profile has been constructed historically and, further, continuously is being constructed in a contemporary context. In its approach, the paper looks for different devices for constructing an aesthetic profile for Danish design which can be created in discourse, visual imagery and spatial settings. The communicative
result may be the impression of Danish design as an aesthetic brand, but we may also critically investigate how it comes into being, and how unique in character it is in the end when we compare with other national design brands and, further, observe this with a context of global exchange of products, meanings and national identities.

Building on aesthetics concepts applicable for analyzing the complexity of design on different levels (sensually, conceptually and contextually), we will analyze contemporary strategies of positioning Danish design in relation to aesthetic parameters. We will look into how a position and profile for Danish design is constructed by aesthetic means. We will focus on the exhibition Everyday Life – Signs of Awareness (2017.8.5-2017.11.5 at 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan) and relate the latter to earlier profiling exhibitions such as the Design in Scandinavia travel exhibition in USA in the 1950’s and Dansk Form in Hamburg in 2000.

Danish Design
When we enter the question of the profile of Danish design, we may at start ask what it is that we talk about and what it is to speak of a specific “Danish” design. Crudely speaking, it is a specific phenomenon and tradition to be fixed in time and place as well as cultural construct at the verge of being a simulacrum. Or, to modify a bit, we may raise the question of how Danish design has been constructed as “Danish design” and how this relates to the actual tradition of objects, designers, companies and institutions originating in Denmark. In order to unpack the question of the “Danish” design and the “Danish design”, we will point to two prevalent discussions in contemporary design historiography: The question of what constitutes national markers in a global design culture, and the ontological status of “Danish design”.

The Global and the National
Several logics constitute the development and articulation of contemporary design. We live in an increasingly global design culture where products may be designed in one country, manufactured in a second and marketed globally and where the character and boundaries of national identities of design get blurry. At the same time, national markers play new roles and gains, paradoxically, in importance in his global situation. As design historians Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei state, “[a]lthough design might be more global than ever before, it is still conditioned by, and in turn informs, its global, regional, national, and local contexts at once” (Fallan & Lees-Maffei 2016: 5). Or, to take this reflection further, “the growth of global cultures makes the examination of national and regional cultures even more important; indeed, we perceive a mandate for national studies of design at this point in global and cultural development (Fallan & Lees-Maffei 2014: 2). Further, design researcher Javier Gimeno-Martínez points out in the book Design and National Identity that national identities takes form as cultural, collective identities which not only is “a product of social interaction, but also of cultural representation” (Gimeno-Martínez 2016: 29).
One such form of cultural representation is, of course, design. The question is, however, which form and expression design has as a representation of a national identity: If it takes place as a homogenizing expression pinpointing a specific national idiom or if a larger heterogeneity is at play. As Fallan and Lees-Maffei precisely points out, the “pigeonholing of a nation’s design culture by means of a few idiosyncratic traits is reductive”; not only may any proposed essence of national character be problematic and national identities be understood “as subtle and nuanced”, but it may also be difficult to “identifying a design or a designer, as a product of one country” as all possible exchanges across borders in production and consumption take place (Fallan & Lees-Maffei 2014: 5).

Despite the difficulties in the “pigeonholing of a nation’s design culture”, national markers are still effective at many levels: for manufacturers in positioning products at the market, for consumers in buying into e.g. “understated, “affordable luxury”” associated with New Nordic design (Munch & Skou 2016: 11), or in the nations branding or positioning themselves through design. The brand of a national design idiom is of course the broadest possible conception of the idea of a brand, but not without precedence in theory and practices (cf. Julier 2014). On the one hand it is a problematic idea, since many different actors and institutions as well as “things” and “events” – sports, politics, tourism, natural disasters etc. – will contribute to the branding more or less consciously and more or less in line with an institutionalized or hegemonic conception of the national brand. On the other hand, the national brand is often employed in marketing products on foreign markets and/or is nurtured by governmental institutions, e.g. through exhibitions showing the best of/the essence/the DNA of e.g. Danish design, as in the recent effort by the Danish Design Council to define the DNA of Danish design (DDC 2016).

“Danish” design
Ontologically, Danish design is real as well as constructed. That is, the denotation of Danish design may be a specific, more or less delimited phenomenon originating in Denmark, while it is a more complex matter with regard to the cultural associations attached to Danish design as these to a high degree in various ways have been constructed.

Looking at denotation, we can point to specifics and origins of Danish design, such as the institutional setting of the school of space equipment and furniture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, where Kaare Klint from 1924 set the ideological norm for a new generation of designers and the discourse on design in Denmark by teaching the importance of human proportions, craftsmanship, user-friendly materials and simple expressions of form. Many of the later renowned Danish designers from the 1950s and 1960s, such as Finn Juhl, Hans J. Wegner, Børge Mogensen and Poul Kjærholm were either students at Klint’s school or indebted to the tradition he inaugurated. There certainly has something which we can call Danish design when we look at design originating in Denmark, even if an exchange with the foreign influences may be said to
constitute a constant marker of Danish design (cf. Dybdahl 2014: 419). Various actors, geography (here and not anywhere else) and language sets the scene for a specific development of Danish design.

But focusing on the cultural meaning of Danish design, we may look at the factors which have been effective in constructing the identity of Danish design and Danish design as something relating to a national identity of Denmark. At least, it is difficult to state any essence to be at the heart of Danish design and to emanate through all the appearances of Danish design.

One effective means is the rhetoric of labels designating an origin, whether in form of being “Made in Denmark” (which often was the case 50 years ago) or “Designed in Denmark” (and, implicitly not made in Denmark, which is often the case today). In this way, Stina Teilmann-Lock has demonstrated that Danish design rests on at least two myths, an early myth of design being made in Denmark, where “‘Danish Design’ became a label that celebrated the idea of design – as a material product – originating in a particular national culture, contributing to an international image of a national cultural identity” (Teilmann-Lock 2016: 165), and a later second-order myth building upon the earlier myth but being an empty signifier taking the shape of a brand. Teilmann-Lock points to the rhetoric mechanism that the “national modifier is reflexively imposed” by the labeling of products as Danish; the “label ‘Danish Design’ is a kind of claim borne by products that are pronounced as Danish; it is an attribution to particular goods of particular qualities and their associated prestige” (158).

Another important means for constructing a profile for Danish design has been the marketing efforts to communicate and brand Danish design as a unified and harmonious entity. Since the 1950s, a network of trade organizations, governmental institutions, professional organizations and companies have taken part in this, not least since the promotion exhibition Design in Scandinavia which travelled across the US in 1954-57 and was organized by The Danish Arts and Crafts Association and its Scandinavian sister organizations (cf. Hansen 2006; Guldberg 2011). At this exhibition, large pictures of Nordic landscapes suggested a more a less direct line from the place of origin (often set in nature) and materials and form of the exhibited pieces.

Marketing efforts like this also set the scene for a value proposition of Danish design. One of the long lasting and oft pointed to alleged properties of Danish design is a close proximity between design reformers and design consumers, where an outset in and a care for the everyday is the foundation of design. Within the refines of Danish design culture this harmony and homogeneity might be accurate regarding at least the ideology and discursive altruism of the profession – we design for the people and the everyday in solid material and simple forms – but just a simple glimpse at everyday material or product culture in Denmark historically and currently will show both diversity and even social distinctions are at play (Finsen 1986; Faber 2008). In this way, the idea of close proximity between the everyday and design in Denmark is another cultural construction and a case of idealized representation.
But no matter how problematic the constructed image of Danish design may be, and no matter how empty a signifier it may be, it is still effective as a marker of Danish design in Denmark as well as abroad. It may be that the proposal of a specific national design idiom may lead to a kind of “imagined community” in sense proposed by the cultural historian Benedict Anderson as imagined, but having effect as being real (Anderson 1991). Underlying the empty signifier of the second-order myth is, of course, the actual workings of specific network of people, organizations, institutions and companies: They were always real. It is the cultural construction of meanings attached to Danish design which is operating as a floating signifier. But it can quite easily be established as a fact that the efforts for marketing Danish design has been successful since the bucket of meanings sought for in the 1950ies are once again currently recirculated in relation to what we will refer to all together as “New Danish Modern” or “New Nordic Design” (cf. Munch & Skou 2016). These meanings are functionality, truth to material, durability, user consciousness and more overall and all things considered also airy meanings as democracy, social equality and harmony, care for and connection to natural environment and continuity between tradition and modernity.

**Aestheticizing Danish Design**

After having established that the cultural meaning content of Danish design is being constructed, we will proceed by asking how this is done in a contemporary context.

In doing this, we will employ concepts from aesthetic theory and aim to connect the material base of the design and the more abstract endeavors in branding: On which material base does Danish design obtain its aesthetic profile, and how is this profiling being framed by different devices in the context of design? In opposition to the popular, often unspecific use of the term “aesthetics”, we will build on a more strict, but multilayered definition of aesthetics, applicable for design (Folkmann 2013): Aesthetics in design is seen as a question of how objects create an appeal to be experienced not only as objects of function, but also a) through sensual qualities of e.g. form, material and texture, b) with a potential to critically reflect conventions of form, their own status as design objects and their meaning potential c) in their framing in the cultural context, e.g. in media and exhibition settings, as this conditions how the aesthetic appeal is created. Whereas a) and b) deal with questions of the aesthetics of the object, c) opens for an investigation of contextual forces aestheticizing the design where aesthetic meaning being ascribed to the objects in question.

For the present investigation of how Danish design is profiled in relation to aesthetic parameters, the guiding questions will be the following:

- How does the aesthetics of the objects and the means of aestheticization relate to each other? What is the logic of the aestheticization and how does it relate to the aesthetics of the actual objects in question? On this point we will focus on the selection of objects, their homogeneity or heterogeneity in relation to
expressions and design categories, and how they are placed in settings which attribute meaning to them.

- Which meaning content does this constructive act create for the objects? Do they get imbued with an ideological meaning content, and how does this relate to point b), that is their potential to critically reflect conventions of form, their own status as design objects and their meaning potential?

- In this regard: How can the aesthetic meaning properties be differentiated from the symbolic?

With this last point we will theoretically as well as practically make a point to differentiate between the symbolic and the aesthetic property of design products. Whereas the aesthetic properties may be closely attached to qualities of the objects, the symbolic properties describe meanings more arbitrarily ascribed to the objects. Or, to refer to Sidney Levy seminal 1959 article, “Symbols for Sale,” where he pointed out that people buy things “not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean”, the function of the symbolic in design is not only to point to the design objects but even more to point to something outside the objects (Levy 1959: 118). Even if the element of “symbolic coding” may be closely or loosely attached to the constitution of design objects in their process of “enabling the attribution of symbolic meaning” (Folkmann 2013: 155), the question of symbolic meaning properties in designs is fundamentally a questions of how objects are made valuable by having meaning ascribed to them. In this context, we can analyze the symbolic dimension of design products as their brand values, brand meanings or the bucket of symbolic associations tied to a brand.

**Exhibitions as a Means of Profiling Design**

The exhibition “Everyday Life – Signs of Awareness” bears the mark of two different kinds of design exhibitions, the exhibition as a way of exhibiting design in a museum (whether designated to art and/or design) which is a phenomenon dating back to the late 19th century but as specific “design” museums have developed massively in the recent 20 years (Michaëlis 2016), and the promotional exhibition where a series of actors, often in a public-private collaboration, employ the exhibition as a platform for showing the best of a country’s or a region’s design. This kind of exhibition can be displayed in a museum but also in other venues such as commercial display rooms. “Everyday Life – Signs of Awareness” is displayed in an art museum.

The travel exhibition Design in Scandinavia may have been the first of its kind, laying the foundation for a discourse of “Scandinavian Design”, or rather “two different discourses […] a commercial one in which “Scandinavian Design” stands for a general brand, and a design cultural one” relating to topics of endurance, coherence and
harmony underlying the “Scandinavian product culture, its ethics and aesthetics” (Guldberg 2011: 58, 56), but it was followed by several more, especially since the 1980s. To take some examples, the travel exhibitions made by the Danish Design Centre, e.g. the exhibition based on the book Problemet kommer først (Bernsen 1982) (The Problem Comes First), displayed Danish design as being inventive, based on logical simplicity and a superb sense of the materials. Whereas Design in Scandinavia was organized by the national associations of craft, applied art, and design in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden (and the American Federation of Arts; Guldberg 2011: 42), and the Danish Design Centre is an organization created by partners in Danish industry in order to promote the use of design in Danish enterprises and to market Danish design internationally, the main activities in promoting Danish design has since the 2000s been organized by actors referring to the Danish Ministry of Culture. In different constellations, Danish Craft or craft.dk, since 2014 a part of the Danish Arts Foundation, has worked on promoting Danish design through exhibitions. Since 1999, the exhibition Danish Crafts Collection has operated as platform for promoting Danish craft and design by selecting objects by designers in the beginning of their career, and since 2008 this concept has been supplemented by MINDCRAFT, an exhibition of the best of Danish craft and design to be displayed at Salone del Mobile in Milan (Mindcraft 2017).

Everyday Life – Signs of Awareness
The exhibition Everyday Life – Signs of Awareness is originating from this construction within the Danish Ministry of Culture. Its main curator in the renowned Danish designer Cecilie Manz in collaboration with crief curator Hiromi Kurosawa from the Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa and is organized to mark or celebrate the 150th year anniversary diplomatic relations between Japan and Denmark. On 800 m² 130 pieces of Danish design from 70 designers have been displayed along with Japanese design.

In introducing the exhibition, the museum’s webpage claims Denmark to be “one of the most resilient design giants in the fields of architecture, furniture and everyday products since the 1930s” and a country which has “a highly developed social system with regard to welfare, education and traffic solutions” (Kanazawa 2017). Further it is claimed that both

“Denmark and Japan have become design-oriented nations, each following a path that springs from a unique background of history and culture. The countries’ excellent design solutions, inspired by a functional, practical, yet aesthetic approach, are reflections of their cultural identities” (Kanazawa 2017)

The proposal is to see design as a reflection of cultural identity which, then, implicitly is claims to be delimited and unitary (Danmark has one cultural identity, Japan another) which in the case of Denmark relates to an ideology of society (“a highly developed
social system”) and to a specific approach to design balancing the “functional, practical” with the “aesthetic”.

The chosen conceptual entrance to the exhibition is the *everyday*. In relation to this, Cecilie Manz states the importance of ”functional and aesthetic craft and design objects and solutions” for the organization of the everyday, and Astrid Krogh, chair of the Danish Arts Foundation committee for supporting this exhibition, says that it is ”exactly through everyday objects that our ability to combine function, understanding of materials and handicraft with a strong artistic sense of form and a clear perception of the user is testified” (Statens Kunstfond 2017).

Now we come to the central question: How is the everyday being fashioned and maintained as aesthetic brand at the exhibition?

First of all, we can state that the exhibition design itself creates an aestheticizing frame for the exhibited design in the way that the objects of design are taken from their original context of everyday life; the design is decontextualized by being displayed in what appears to be close to the white cube setting of design modernism (and many museums). Through the decontextualized white cube setting the attention is directed away from situations of practical use and towards formal and material qualities of the objects; not only as singular objects but also as constellations of objects which they cast light on each other and – so to speak – co-construct the abstract formal meaning potential of each other. The strategy of decontextualization is often employed in design exhibitions: As viewers, we should then not see exhibited objects as objects of use as part of a more or less muddled everyday filled with stuff, but as special objects worth of a dedicated, special and even – in a Kantian sense – disinterested interest through the optics of the art museum as institution.

Exceptions do exist (cf. Michaëlis 2016) but at the *Everyday Life – Signs of Awareness* exhibition, the dominant strategy of employing clean and clear lines of the white cube setting is confirmed. In the room dedicated to “Materiality” a central part is a podium split in four parts with each its theme (Fig. 1, background). Two of the themes are “Almost nothing” (Fig. 2) and “Functionality” (Fig. 3).
In these two installations, the objects are curated to relate to (and co-construct) each other. In the first case, an aesthetic minimalism is at play through a minimal use of materials and dominant focus on geometrical forms. In reducing the objects to basic forms in various material incarnations, the installation to a high degree affirms the white cube setting; we can even say that the objects in their minimalism are at the verge of being absorbed in this setting. In the second installation, a stronger material presence seems to be the element tying the objects together. In comparison with the first installation, a material abundance is clearly at play, but the white cube setting also may seem to let these objects and materials appear lighter than they are. The objects in this installation may have a ‘heavier’ sensual aesthetics but the aestheticizing strategy of the exhibition design lets it obtain a ‘lighter’ expression.

At the Dansk Form exhibition in Hamburg in 2000 a different strategy of combining objects could be seen. Here, industrial design artefacts and craft objects
made pairs in accordance to form, e.g. vacuum cleaner and a heavy ceramic object (Folkmann 2000). In the “dialogue” between the two kinds of objects, the aesthetic communication had more emphasis on the relation between the two objects (similarities of form and expression) that the context of the exhibition room or exhibition setting. In a podium setting such as the one in the “Materiality” room, the aestheticizing device of the exhibition takes over.

In both installations, the focus is on purchasable everyday objects for the home or the everyday life. In the installation in from of Fig. 1 (see Fig. 4), the textile designer Anne Fabricius Møller has collected array of materials and objects which may be a part of everyday life but as found objects, parts of objects or even waste found on the street. She has then made a textile reproduction of the forms and patterns of the objects. Whereas a more homogeneous selection of objects constituted the two installations at the podium, the objects here are more heterogeneous in form, material and expression, even if not in size. As found objects, the selection principle in Møller’s is random, and her selection of objects could be said to testify an anthropological or even archeological approach to the material culture of Denmark. Many of the objects are dark (and dirty) and far from the clean norm of aesthetic minimalism. The objects are, subsequently, being aestheticized by their organization and by losing their materiality and obtaining a new status as abstract pattern in the textile reproduction. The heterogeneity gets homogenized and, in the same instance, loses their weight as material object.

Just as in the pairing of objects in Dansk Form (which Møller co-organized) the aestheticizing principle comes from the inner-object communication and constellation rather than from the exhibition setting. Again, the principles are homogenizing, making lighter and abstracting.

As a last example, we can look at the room called the “Home” where we can find, for example, kitchen and dining table (Fig. 5 & 6). Here, the clean, abstracting organizing principles of the exhibition design is in operation which clearly can be seen

Fig. 4
in the large shelves and in the arranged staging of everyday situations which never breaks the illusion of being arranged for an exhibition (even if the dining table is slightly disorganized and a book for cooking lies open at the kitchen table). The ambition is, as we see it, never to create an illusion of real everyday situations, but to let the everyday life and its objects aesthetically saturate each other: The audience should learn that the otherwise aestheticized objects at the exhibition also are objects of an everyday life in Denmark and, vice versa, the exhibition will make its audience clear that the everyday object do indeed have aesthetic characters of form, material, texture, colour and abstract graphic constellations – as in the use of black, a little and dominant white at the dining table.

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

That a strategy of the exhibition is to let the audience see the details of everyday life in a new light, can also be seen at the entrance to this room, where a door is taken off its frame and set in isolation on the floor (Fig. 7). Then we see the door (its texture and weight) and, especially, the door handle designed by Arne Jacobsen: The door handle is, then, not only something that we grasp, more or less without noticing it, in order to open a door, but also something we then perceive as having a special presence, as a as “a momentary and simultaneous abundance of appearance” (Seel 2007: 13)
through form and material – and designer name. In this, the subtitle of the exhibition, *Signs of Awareness* is being confirmed.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Fig. 7**

**Aesthetic Markers of the Everyday**

Summing up on these analytical viewpoints, we can easily state that the exhibition does not just let the everyday into the exhibition, but operates through strategies of aiming to let the audience perceive the design of the everyday life in an aesthetic perception with focus on form, material and texture. In this operation, the exhibition aestheticizes the design of everyday life by making it lighter, homogeneous and abstract. The everyday represented at the exhibition is not filled with muddy stuff but with an airy sense of lightness and focus on form.

In this, there is nothing new with regard to typical strategies of design exhibitions. The question is, next, which aesthetic profile of Danish design it creates and which specific national markers it suggests. What is the “imagined community” of this setting of design? And does the exhibition anything beyond the confirming the more or less official image of Danish design as told by the Danish Design Council in their proposal of a DNA for Danish design through 10 values, such as e.g. social, human, quality, holistic and user oriented, “which provide a picture of Danish design both past and present” (DDC 2016: 2, 10)? Or as it is told by the marketing platform danish.tm which states its aim “to show what it is that makes Denmark one of the leading societies within the field of design and architecture” through exemplary cases and suggestive images (Danish.tm 2017)? Does the exhibition merely confirm the second-order myth of Danish design?
In many regards it does. It aestheticizes the design objects curated at the exhibition to confirm some kind of DNA of Danish design as simple, form-oriented, user-oriented, superbly executed in good materials and with a focus on the everyday. At the same time, however, there are glimpses at the exhibition for trying to show how the objects are actual vehicles for an intensified everyday experience and for wider meaning potentials in the same way Vilém Flusser has shown in his “phenomenological sketches” (Flusser xxxx) how everyday objects is a way to experience the complexity of modern life. The meeting of means of aestheticization and the concrete aesthetic appearance of the objects is a constructive act which not only lets the objects be imbued with an abstract ideology of being “democratic” or related to “welfare” but lets them be prism for an experience of what the everyday life feels like through form and material. We will not go so far as to say that the objects are aesthetically coded in a way that they critically reflect conventions of form and their own status as design objects. But if we speak of aesthetic coding in a more general sense as a relationship between outer physical manifestation and inner idea of the object in the question of how the specific meaning content can be physically manifested and reflected in a variety of ways in the object (Folkmann 2013), we may say that the exhibition lays open that an aesthetic coding is part of design. Further, the exhibition may open for an aesthetic judgment in the way the philosopher Jane Forsey has proposed when she says that an account of design, “with a broader view on both the way that aesthetic judgement operates and the objects to which it applies, is better situated to claim that quotidian life indeed does have aesthetic texture” (Forsey 2013: 249).

Finally, what is symbolic and what is aesthetic? The aesthetic properties and the effects of aestheticization are indeed employed to give content to profiling Danish design as brand. All possible values, such as e.g. the positive values of the ubiquitous welfare society may be attached to design (and Danish design) – and we may also have the tendency to see design as a wonder mean to create a better future. In the optimistic version of the Danish Design Council, the promising future is already here, fulfilled be design. But in the end, it all starts with the concrete objects and their potentials. In an exhibition like this, just as in the exhibition Dansk Form, we may be aware of the “aesthetic texture” of everyday life in their specific material or formal expressions – whether deriving from Denmark or not.

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