SHIFTING MINDSET
towards sustainability at Linnaeus University Design Programmes

Sara Hyltén-Cavallius
sara.hylten-cavallius@lnu.se
School of Design, Linnaeus University
SE 351 95 Växjö, Sweden

Abstract
The School of Design, part of Linnaeus University in Sweden, has been focusing on new
design thinking in our education. In the Sustainability specialization within the Design
Programme we have been striving to increase the awareness of sustainability concerns
(environmental, social and economic) instead of being traditionally focused on aesthetics.

We have developed a programme in line with the increasingly problematic world, where
climate change is just one incitement for proposing attitudinal changes. The process of
shifting our own and our students’ mindsets has been successful. As soon as the students
come to grips with the actual situation they are more than willing to change from the
romantic dreams of figuring in glossy magazines to developing new fields for their research.
Design education can have an impact on society while working closely and together with
society to explore what design can do. We are proud of what we have achieved and are
heading for a future where the design discipline takes a leading role in transforming vital
parts of our society.

In my paper I will present one of the projects where the focus was on collaborating with a
municipal housing company and a Swedish migration institution. It will include some of the
extraordinary ideas developed by our students. My aim is to exemplify ‘design in action’,
which might mean a changing and expanding view of the design of today and tomorrow.
Shifting Mindset.

KEYWORDS: Shifting, sustainability, social innovation
Introduction

The School of Design, which is part of the Linnaeus University in Sweden, has during the last seven years been focusing on the connections between design and a sustainable society, paving the way to a new kind of design as well as of design thinking. This pervades all of our educational praxis, as transmitted by theoretical courses but also in the more practically oriented ones, as for instance the Sustainability specialization of the Design programme. Henceforth we have been striving for increasing the awareness of sustainable concerns (cultural, environmental, social and economic) instead of hanging on to traditional concerns about aesthetics and commercialism.

During the last few years we have been able to develop a program in line with the increasingly problematic world, where climate change is just one incitement to proposing an attitudinal change. The process of shifting our own and our students’ mindsets has been successful. As soon as the students come to grips with the actual situation they are more than willing to change from the romantic dreams of figuring in glossy magazines to developing new fields for their research. Design education can have an impact on society while working closely together with different actors within society to explore what design can do to their special fields. We are proud of what we have achieved so far and are heading for a future where the design discipline takes a leading role in transforming vital parts of our society.

Design and sustainability in the past

As we are all well aware, the function of design has been shifting over time. 150 years ago, in the infancy of industrialization, John Ruskin claimed: That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings. William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement were inspired by the socialist movements of the time and wanted to create artefacts which would by combining functionality with beauty increase the feeling of happiness among the population. The problem was that the majority never got access to these goods, as they could never afford to buy them.

In Sweden we have something like a tradition of thinking in sustainable terms, even if this never permeated design thinking. Notabilities like Ellen Key advocated the usefulness of combining function and beauty in order to create a better society, and 100 years ago Svenska slöjdöreningen ["The Swedish Society of Industrial Design"] mounted an exposition where the publication, Vackrare vardagsvara ["More Beautiful Things for Everyday Use"], by the architect Gregor Paulsson, was distributed. He argued that artists should cooperate within factories in order to increase the quality of the products. The purpose was that all people should be in touch with beautiful things and through this beauty become beautiful human beings. At the time there was no discussion of what beauty is or what it can mean in different contexts to different people.

After World War II there was great trust in the future. Society was to be rebuilt and there was a happy future waiting for everyone. Factories were producing artefacts which seemed to be needed to build the future of people’s dreams. Dreams were created by cool male PR and advertising people, and suddenly everybody felt the urge to own a toaster, a vacuum cleaner, or why not a blender? Prices went steadily down and it became realistic to buy and keep buying your own versions of all the things the PR people flagged for. They were working for industry, and so did the designers who were in charge of making the artefacts functional and aesthetic. Some decades later, Rachel Carson stated in her book Silent Spring that the use of pesticides in farming would kill animals and the result would be deadly silence. The environmental movement was born. The movement had very little impact on society at the
time but was an important starting point for the on-going work with changing how we in society treat the environment for growth. We know the rest, with meetings in Rio, Copenhagen etc., but sadly enough not much has happened. Economic values win over sustainable solutions.

As we might learn from history, there are Swedish designers who have been motivated to work for a more sustainable society through their profession. The famous Victor Papanek had an impact on Swedish design, culminating in what still exists as Ergonomic Design. The majority of the designers were heading in another direction, to improve industrial artefacts, all for profit. So, what do the Swedish design organizations say about design taking responsibility for a more sustainable society in 2012?

Mapping the field

The Swedish Association of Designers does not, sadly enough, discuss the role of design for a better society on their website. We could notice the criteria for Stora Designpriset [in translation: the Grand Award of Design]. The jury rewards products where design promotes commercial success. The Grand Award of Design is directed towards a Swedish company and its design supplier. If my interpretation is correct, a prize winner should be produced by a company that collaborates with a designer, the most important role for design being to turn out a commercial success. We are not satisfied with these criteria.

Things are changing, though. Another Swedish association, The Swedish Industrial Design Foundation (SVID), collaborates with what is called the Natural Step and its Sustainability Guide. On its website SVID declares: In this guide, SVID, the Swedish Industrial Design Foundation, aims to plant a seed that will grow into an understanding of the role of design methodology in moving society towards sustainability. This means that their intention is that designers should take part in and responsibility for a more sustainable society. We are satisfied with this statement.

Looking beyond Sweden, in 2005 Hilary Cottam was named the UK Designer of the Year, hosted by the Design Museum, London. She works in the field of social entrepreneurship and has been developing solutions to social issues like prison systems, ageing, and families in chronic crises. If we compare her efforts to the Grand Award of Design in Sweden and the Designer of the Year award, the UK conveys a signal to us that we are working in the right direction. We applaud that!

What then is sustainable development? What do we mean by the term, so commonly used and misused? In the report *Our Common Future*, more known as the Brundtland Report and today criticized and considered as an incomplete but still important resolution, the conclusion reads:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

1) the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

2) Thus the goals of economic and social development must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries - developed or developing, market-oriented or centrally planned. Interpretations will vary, but must share certain general features and must flow from a consensus on the basic concept of sustainable development and on a broad strategic framework for achieving it.

The founder of the Natural Step organization, Karl-Henrik Robert, thought the definition of sustainability was laid on a too high philosophical level for providing a good practical guidance. He therefore created a consensus dialogue with several researchers, and identifying the four principles for sustainability that can guide concrete action.

These principles state that, in a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:
1) materials drawn from the earth’s crust;

2) substances produced by society;

3) degradation of natural systems by physical means;

4) and in this sustainable society, people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their own needs.

These principles should be natural, especially to enable every human being to fulfill their basic needs. When did we stop choosing that as a starting point?

The Swedish Design Faculty, with members from all Design education departments in Sweden, drew up a strategy for research on July 10, 2011, proposed by the chairman Peter Ullmark. The strategy describes design as going from being an aesthetic practice, like industrial design, to become an innovative part of the process of change in general. This is important, even if it must be admitted that it might be hard to visualize an implementation on a broad scale. It is easier to identify the “business as usual” paradigm in the work of Swedish designers.

Social innovation is one way of forming the process of change and the development of society. The MEDEA, the Collaborative Media Initiative group at Malmö University is working with collaborative processes, stating that the process of design is well suited to pursue development that will respond to social needs. Design processes which are based on including users and stakeholders in participatory design and rapid prototyping have proved useful for social innovation. One project is Herrgårds kvinnoforening (HKF), a women’s organization working in a neighbourhood called Herrgård, which was started eight years ago by five immigrant women who felt excluded from Swedish society. They worked with activities like cooking and textile design. At a reunion with the Design faculty in October 2011 Anna Servalli presented their project and explained that it has been very exciting, but not easy. Union representatives complained that the activities by this group competed with ordinary jobs. Another issue concerned when a woman, coming from a culture where the husband is usually the head of the family, after a successful project gets a position in society that her husband has not. As her husband lost his position when coming to Sweden, this created a new situation in the couple’s balance in life and marriage. So, although starting out with the best of ambitions, such projects might end up in more ways than prognosticated – who said it was easy?

MEDEA has been inspired by Young Foundation in the UK. This is how Young Foundation introduces itself on its website: The Young Foundation brings together insights, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. Social innovation is defined as: New ideas that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. Innovations that are both good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act. Geoff Mulgan, former head of Young Foundation, describes the limits of design in projects concerning social innovation. Designers do not have enough knowledge of economics and organizing. He adds that designers lack the ability to implement the projects, and as their fees are high they seldom get, or are granted, a long-term commitment. Therefore designers should collaborate with other disciplines working with social innovation and use their methods to reach more robust and long-term solutions.

Ezio Manzini and Francesca Rizzo wrote an article in 2011 called “Small projects/large changes”. The main questions discussed in the article are: What could citizens’ active participation do to promote and support large-scale sustainable changes? What can design do to stimulate and support this process?

Having analyzed several projects, the authors arrived at the conclusion that to be successful in large scale projects, like those comprising cities or regions, social innovation and participatory design have to be integrated. The function of the designer will be as tutor, mediator or initiator. Designers could work with end users and together realize meaningful projects. Ezio Manzini is a professor at Polytech, Milano, and the founder of DESIS, Design for Social Innovation towards Sustainability.
In an interview with Experientia, a global experience design agency, Manzini describes an on-going project, Nutrire Milano, in cooperation between Slow Food, Politecnico di Milano and Facoltà di Scienze Gastronomiche. The goal of the project is to regenerate peri-urban Milanese agriculture (that is agriculture near the city) and, at the same time offer organic and local food opportunities to the citizens. To do that implies promoting radically new relationships between the countryside and the city, in other words, creating brand-new networks of farmers and citizens based on direct relationships and mutual support.

This is a good example of how design can interact with other disciplines and reach sustainable solutions for citizens living and working in a region.

This year a new and interesting network started in Stockholm. This is how it is introduced on its website: Green Leap is a network for design and sustainable development and a part of CESC, Centre for Sustainable Communications, at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm Sweden. Our mission is to become a catalyst for change by engaging design in sustainable development. In February, Green Leap had a reunion with teachers in design and sustainability, and we discussed how to work with sustainability in our schools of design. It became more than obvious that the actors within the field have different interpretations of the topic ‘design & sustainability’. Very few design schools in Sweden have an overall programme strategy for sustainability with theory integrated. We have been striving for an increased awareness of sustainable concerns (cultural, environmental, social and economic) instead of being traditionally focused on Aesthetics.

Design program at Linnaeus University, Sweden

In the syllabus the following is highlighted:

Societal and cultural changes require a new approach to design and new roles of a designer. Therefore, the Sustainability specialization of the Design Programme is grounded on a humanity and social science basis. It involves a holistic approach, which assumes that method and theory meet today’s challenges with the highest standards of sustainable development. Education focuses, therefore, on promoting the design processes under cultural, ecological and long-term economic conditions, on the basis of theories aimed at human welfare in every sense. The programme is theme-based and focuses on the design aspect in social and cultural contexts.

Through basic courses students acquire a general and broad theoretical-practical foundation in graphic design, product design and spatial design, while advanced courses allow the student’s individual elective specialization within the framework of the given themes. The teaching takes the form of projects within both theory and practice. Design theory and practice are features integrated in the courses and provide insights that are both artistically and scientifically related. Inter- and multidisciplinary activities are made possible by the university campus. After completing the programme, the student is prepared for employment in the private and public sectors.

Another very important aspect is to have a plan for education in sustainability for all the teaching members of the faculty. We collaborate among others with the Natural Step organization, and our teachers participate in their courses. Why is this? Even if not all our courses are labelled sustainability, it is important that all feedback from tutor to students is based on such an approach.

A Case Study

So, how do we do this? The Bachelor programme has a sustainable framework throughout. The 5th semester we focus entirely on sustainability. Students have assimilated design in practice and theory, so now it is time to deepen the sustainability perspective.

We start with a manifesto in Module 1. The tasks of the students are to articulate their general attitudes to design, visually and textually. After completing the course the students
are expected to show an understanding of the designer’s new roles in a sustainable society and reflect on their roles as a designer from a sustainable perspective. We continue in Module 2 by acquainting the students with a sustainable toolbox to help them understand the sustainable perspective as part of the design process. The students are expected to formulate a question in a given context, leading to a project where methods and tools for sustainable development are applied. We want them to be able to analyze self-critically their own view of sustainability.

Last year, in Module 3, we worked with a project called *What can Design do for Torpsbruk*? Torpsbruk is a small community with 350 inhabitants outside the small town of Alvesta in Southern Sweden. Today the community has no school, shops or restaurants. The buses into town are decreasing in number. There is a societal association, which is a forum for discussions of how people want to develop their community. In this project we worked together with AlboHus, a municipal housing corporation with ABF, an adult liberal education association, and with the Migration Office, as there are asylum seekers living in this community.

We started by staying on site for a couple of days, meeting the people living there in what we call *Meet and Eat*. We invited all people to the Café Torpsbruk, run by the ABF, to sit down and talk to us over a simple meal, one evening with the community association in Torpsbruk and the next evening with the asylum seekers. This was done by recommendation from AlboHus to make us realize that several people living in Torpsbruk found it difficult to have asylum seekers moving in and, after weeks or months, moving out again. After finishing our field study, we went back to the university. Now we had to try to analyze what kind of reality we had been part of. For two months students were working with this project, starting with formulating questions and a project of their own. Students continued visiting the site, going back and forth in order to get closer to the people and the community.

The overarching question was: *What can Design do for Torpsbruk?* Is design a tool for societal issues? In the end students presented very interesting and varied projects, because our Design programme focusing on Sustainability is a general education programme and our students choose their own approach to design. They identify themselves as designers, not graphic or space designers. We also invited people living in Torpsbruk to visit Linnaeus University for a presentation of the projects. Many interesting discussions took place with students getting feedback from excited citizens.

Three projects will illustrate what kind of work came out of this session.

**Johan Ahlbäck worked with Vizualisation of Statistics.**

Background: *The political climate in Europe has in recent decades had a right-wing hue that has continued to grow in strength. This has not been seen since the time before Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist Party took power in Germany in the 1930s. The debate climate is strained and various media treat the situation in different ways. Some journalists are trying to focus on the question, while others are ignoring it. This is constantly used in the conspiracy-like theories of the right-wing media.*

Project: *This project is based on the Migration Board’s responsibility to demonstrate transparency and participation. In our information age the Migration Board has the possibility to show correct information on its web site in a simple way to a great many people. It is therefore important that as long as we have a government, elected by the majority, we should be able to have confidence in them, not in xenophobic groups that seem to exploit the ignorance of the majority in order to create fear. Ahlbäck’s design project was trying to increase the availability and transparency of governmental organizations in order to avoid suspicion. In this case it means increasing the understanding of important data concerning migration and integration by visualizing Migration Board statistics in a more appealing and understandable manner and making it into a basis for discussion and actual political participation.*

Ahlbäck focused on info-graphics and experimented with vizualising statistics. His target group consisted of young men in their most vulnerable adolescence, before they turn into angry young men. He witnessed an information gap in society and tried to make a solution in his own way. His inclination as a designer lies within the graphic sector, which explains his interest.
Erika Lindmark worked with a project called Our Stories.

Background: In Torpsbruk there is a clear divide between those who live permanently in the community and the asylum seekers. The former have an inadequate knowledge and understanding of the situation which they find themselves in. There circulate many negative stories among the permanent residents about the asylum seekers as a source of anxiety and prejudice. Meanwhile, the asylum seekers living in Torpsbruk have no opportunity to get an insight into how the permanent residents live and no ability to integrate and become involved in the community.

Project in the student’s own writing: Our stories are an integration project for children aged 10 - 12 years where the children are given the opportunity to talk about themselves to other children with photography as a medium. The idea is for children of different backgrounds to learn about each other to increase their mutual understanding, while they may express themselves and work with their creativity. I did a workshop with ABF in Torpsbruk with children living permanently in the community and asylum seekers. The participating children were given a camera to photograph glimpses of their lives. The material in the form of children’s pictures and comments were then collected in a booklet that was placed in the Café Torpsbruk and distributed to the children who participated. The workshop then became the basis for developing a system for how the project can be applied in school with a manual describing the various stages of the project.

Lindmark focused on integration. Most students experienced this as the most important issue. Erika was working with a project with children to help them getting integrated in Swedish society easier and faster and by this also involving their parents.

Angelica Gustafsson worked with a project called Cooperation.

Background: Cooperative integration is a project that is about just what it seems to be about - inclusion. Perhaps these questions have never been more relevant than now, in 2012, with a society that is more globalized than ever, thanks to the Internet and other media. Meanwhile, the Swedish people have for the first time permitted a nationalistic party, the Sweden Democrats, into our parliament. This demonstrates segregation rather than globalization.

In recent years, Torpsbruk has started to obtain a bad reputation. According to several of the most committed residents of the community, this is because of the asylum accommodation and the conflicts that have arisen in connection with this. None of the asylum seekers seemed to have perceived this. In conversation with them they do not agree, and instead view inactivity as the biggest problem.

The Project: Cooperation for Integration is a service design concept originating in the problems of integration in modern Sweden. More and more communities suffer from poor integration, mostly among immigrant Swedes and seniors. Cooperative integration is a concept for a platform between ABF, Tillväxtverket (the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth) and others, which aims at encouraging the emergence of cooperative movements in society.

Gustafsson also spotted integration as the main issue. Her aim was to get the immigrants included in society, as soon as possible, and at the same time bring some services to this small community that would make life easier for residents as well for asylum seekers. Gustafsson worked with the system for cooperation and through her interest in graphic design she made an illustration of the system and the information material for the participants.

Conclusions

It is hard work making projects with external collaborators. A great deal of coordination is involved, and it takes plenty of time and meetings to get everybody to understand what we as educators want to achieve. The partners also have different agendas, wishes and views. Most of the time I have to inform them that our agenda is a school project and also that one of the criteria of the course is that the students are supposed to find an important question and...
make a project out of that. The collaborators often think that they know what the problems are, but they get impressed or astonished when the students present a totally different kind of view.

The opening of the exhibition to which we invite all the participants and residents to participate is a crucial event: students get feedback from people living there and working there. As teachers we can always give feedback and tutorials from the design perspective but not on the basis of whether the project “makes sense”, i.e., whether it is relevant or not from the point of view of the target groups. They are all present participating collaborators, business perpetrators and residents. It is also a very good opportunity to make the community aware of what design can do. Our collaborators very often express the view that they used to think that design was something fuzzy. That our students are supposed to have acquired the ability of writing and verbalizing to understand the sustainability concept from a humanistic and societal perspective is in most cases a complete novelty to “the public”. This makes it possible for the students to explain their project in a serious way and verbalize their ambitions. This collaboration educates our participants to see the new role and new way of working with design: that of design as a facilitator in society. Hopefully they will employ a designer to make the change. And hopefully enough: they have provoked the participants to consider some changes for the better in the system.

Design is a tool for societal development!

References

Ruskin, J (1860) Unto This Last, essay IV, paragraph 77

Paulson, G Vackra världsvara (1919)


http://www.designpriiset.se/ Swedish Design price

http://www.svid.se/sv/English/

http://www.naturalstep.org/

http://www.youngfoundation.org/

http://medea.mah.se/

http://www.greenleap.kth.se/

Ullmark, P (2010) Design Faculty Strategy


Ahlbäck, J (2011) Visualization of Statistics

Lindmark, E (2011) Our Stories

Gustafsson, A (2011) Cooperation