

General and New Perspectives on Product Design in Finland

Timo Silvonen
Finland Industrial Designer

Finland, the small Nordic country, far from anywhere, just happens to be one of the most modern and technologically advanced nations in the world. It is also the home of several leading global brands in their fields. Among these belong for example Nokia, Kone Elevators, and Metso Paper. This strange, cold country with its reserved and introvert Arctic people, manages to operate smoothly in the global village; in business, technology and also world politics. People from all over the world want to go to Finland to study and work, knowing a lot about the clean, green, spacious country with extensive social security, equal women and general well-being. How can this be possible?

After surviving the World War II the remote country with a very strong national identity started a determined development (with the heavy burden of reparations to the Soviet Union) and found its distinctive strengths in high level of education, technological know-how and practical, close-to-nature design. Freedom to be oneself and national independence are highly valued and earned. Industrial arts gave birth to the very concept of 'Finnish Design' and generated public awareness of Finnish glass, ceramics, furniture and textiles. Today, the industrial design created in the last few decades is demonstrating the versatility of Finnish industrial expertise.

Finland is one of the world's sparsest populated and most densely forested countries. Thus, the closeness to nature has taught us to live along the wilderness and draw inspiration from natural materials, as well as nature's practical designs. Finnish product design has been responsible in creating the term 'Nordic cool'. Combining ergonomics, functionality, no-nonsense timeless styling and sustainability with high-tech know-how, the quality, usability and aesthetics of Finnish products is now well appreciated throughout the world.

Coming from a country of only 5.2 million inhabitants, the Finns have always had to look abroad to survive in business. Home market was never enough for high-tech, mass-produced lo-tech hasn't been profitable for decades with the high labor costs Finland has. Maybe the 'view of the outsider' to the world taught us the importance of understanding different cultures and lifestyles quite well. This, for example, is the secret behind Nokia's rise to the world's biggest mobile phone manufacturer, executed by technological expertise and high design.

High taxation builds good education, free for all Finns, including universities. Design is now regarded as one of the key competencies of Finnish economy, and it is increasingly supported with government-level initiatives. Graduate students of design, economics and engineering study each others' fields as minor subjects. Collaboration of universities, design colleges, other research/development institutions and the corporate world is building a multidisciplinary knowledge-base for

future innovations and design business. Best practices are documented, processes are planned and streamlined and information is shared.

Size doesn't matter when knowledge is found, organized, shared and utilized in the most effective ways. Common understanding of design across professional and institutional borders gives a small country a chance to match the big ones in global competition.

Invited Professor, Industrial Design
College of Fine Arts, Seoul National University
timo_silvonon@hotmail.com