

The Penetration of Scandinavia Furniture in Britain 1950-1970

Nikki Indah Andraini

Staf pengajar Jurusan Desain Interior, FSRD, Universitas Tarumanagara, Jakarta

Abstract:

Artikel ini dibuat berdasarkan analisa terhadap dua artikel yang berasal dari jurnal akademik mengenai sejarah desain Skandinavia. Artikel pertama berjudul 'Twentieth Century Danish Furniture Design and the English Vernacular Tradition' sedangkan artikel kedua berjudul 'Norwegian Wood? Scandinavian Design in Britain 1950 – 65'. Diskusi mendalam mengenai relasi antara 'cultural identity' dan 'buying pattern' sehubungan dengan upaya mengusung produk mebel Skandinavia agar dapat masuk dan diterima oleh masyarakat Inggris menjadi inti permasalahan pada artikel ini.

Key Words: *Furnitur Skandinavia, Sejarah Furnitur Inggris*

CONTEXTUAL APPRAISAL

The titles of the text are 'Twentieth Century Danish Furniture Design and the English Vernacular Tradition' (taken from Scandinavian Journal of Design History – 7 – 1997) and 'Norwegian Wood? Scandinavian Design in Britain 1950 – 65' (taken from Scandinavian Journal of Design History – 8 – 1998). Kevin Davies wrote both of the texts. The texts that I selected were articles in a journal, which can be categorized as an academic journal that covers the attention very specifically in the area of Scandinavian design history. Each of the articles contains 14 pages, which are considered easy reading article. Scandinavian Journal of Design History is quite popular among design students, particularly to those that have strong interest in product design and furniture design.

It is understood that the author of this article appears as an expert in Scandinavian Design History. As we know there's lot of scholarly debates over Scandinavian design, the author of this article believed that understanding the reception and representation of Scandinavian design in Britain is a complex problem and needs further attention. The expected readerships of this article are Arts & Design students, Art & Design academics, Historian and professional designers. It's assumed, the readership has a high level of expertise in arts and design history.

ANALYSIS OF METHODOLOGY

It is mentioned that reception of Scandinavian design has also been covered in Lesley Jackson "A positive influence; the impact of Scandinavian design in Britain during the 1950s is also

published by Scandinavian Journal of Design History, 3, 1993, 41-60 and this topic also can be found in Harry Kahla, "The Golden Age of Finish Industrial Arts: Images, Marketing, Discourse", in *Form, Function, Finland*, 4, No.68, 1997, 36-39. Both Kahla and Jackson have situated their discussion within the context of trade whereas the main discussion of Davies is the reception of Scandinavian design in Britain. From the first article (published in 1997), Davies concentrated in two interesting issues; firstly, why British vernacular Windsor-type chairs were being made in Denmark and secondly, why these were being sold in Britain. While from the other article (published in 1998), Davies's aims of his essay were to see how Scandinavian goods from Scandinavia fitted into the lives and minds of the British during this period and to show how common notions about Scandinavian design its meticulous craftsmanship, were propagated by the sale of goods. The author intends to explore and investigate these two different discussions, examine it and taking the correlation of it. It is confirmed that author using both primary data and also secondary data for his study. According to Malhotra, Primary data originated by the researcher for the specific purpose of addressing the research problem on the other hand the secondary data, it is a data collected for some purpose of other than problem at hand. Secondary data plays very important role for this study, the source used for secondary data originated from published material such as academics journals, newspapers, photo advertising, design magazines and books. From the bibliography of this text demonstrated that author using other materials as their inputs of study, which most of it's from other academics journals and most of the data considered to be fairly reliable.

The methodology is used effectively but it is suggested that the author could use more resource for his study, the study of representation of Scandinavian design in Britain is a very complex problem, what the author presented here is only preliminary and partial attempt that could be expanded to be debated. The interpretation and conclusion are considered to be fairly reliable, however the disadvantage of using this exploratory approach of the findings is not conclusive due to the method of gathering the data, and this research is generally followed by further exploratory or conclusive research. It is suggested that the author use other method such as surveys, panels and observational other data in order to achieve better outcome. I reckoned that this study is expandable and also can be used as a model for other research or study.

ANALYSIS OF THEORY

The concept of Scandinavian Design that is argued to be the key concepts in these articles perhaps emerged in the 1930's in the three Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) as well as Finland. Traditionally, Davies mentioned that Scandinavian design has been associated with simple, uncomplicated designs, functionality and democratic approach. Scandinavian design also become identical with the development of modernism in the 1950s and 1960's, and was featured in numerous exhibitions, trade show and publications. In the first journal (published in 1997), Davies argued that the idea of beautiful and functional everyday

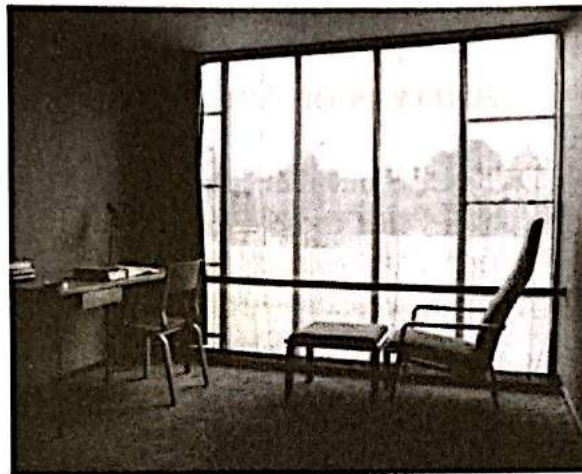
objects should not only be affordable to the rich and the powerful, but to all, is a core theme in the development of modernism and functionalism, but it is probably most completely realized after the World War II. Broadly, the second journal (published 1998) explain that the ideological background was the emergence of a particular Scandinavian form of social democracy in the 1950s, as well as the increased availability of new low cost materials and methods for mass production. Much Scandinavian Design makes use of form-pressed wood, plastics, anodized or enameled aluminum or pressed steel.

The success of Scandinavian design concept was proved by The Lunning Prize, awarded to outstanding Scandinavian designers between 1951 and 70, was very incremental monumental in both making Scandinavian furniture Design a recognized commodity, and in defining the profile of Scandinavian Design.

I identified unity and modernism as the cultural identity approaches being used in this study. In the first journal, Davies argued that the concept of Scandinavian design refers to cultural phenomenon; it is often used to present an image of unity and conformity that is not related in a direct or straightforward way to the physical or ethnic realities and boundaries of the Scandinavian landmass and its populations. Scandinavian design sometimes perceived as cultural uniforms such as united Scandinavia that consist of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. The concept of unity, regardless geographical and origin, these country of four unite as one identity as Scandinavian design. The concepts proved very effective to position Scandinavian goods in one brand and unity to consumers. It is a unique concept of selling, perhaps this concept cannot always applicable to others countries or other part of the world. It is argued that the concept of unity possible because indeed Scandinavian design produced the themes and concepts.

I analyzed other approach as modernism, as the Scandinavian design it self became synonymous with the development of modernism in 1950's and 1960s, and was featured in numerous exhibitions and trade shows. We will try to look at the modernism in furniture more detail; the concept of modern furniture refers to furniture produced from the late 19th century through the present that is influenced by modernism. At that time was a tremendous departure from all furniture design that had gone before it. Dark or gilded carved wood and richly patterned fabrics gave way to the glittering simplicity and geometry of polished metal. The forms of furniture evolved from visually heavy to visually light. Prior to the modernist design movement there was an emphasis on furniture as ornament, the length of time apiece took to create was often a measure of its value and desirability. During the first half of the 19th Century a new philosophy emerged shifting the emphasis to function and accessibility. Western design generally, whether architectural or design of furniture had for millennia sought to convey an idea of lineage, a connection with tradition and history. The modern movement sought newness, originality, technical innovation, and ultimately the message that it conveyed spoke of the present and the

future, rather than of what had gone before it. Modernist design seems to have evolved out of a combination of influences: Technically innovative materials and manufacturing methods, the new philosophies that emerged from the Werkbund and the Bauhaus School, from exotic foreign influences, from Art Nouveau and from the tremendous creativity of the artists and designers of that era. It is mentioned that German is the first to find the new methods and technology such as the use of new materials such as steel, molded wood and of course plastics which were very formative in the creation of these modern design. Although Germany the one that come up the innovation of new material but, it is argued that Scandinavian designer given very much influences in the development of modern furniture.



Picture 1.

Student accommodation in St. Catherine's College. Designed in 1954.

(Available from: <http://www.scandesign.org>)

Arne Jacobsen (February 11, 1902 – March 24, 1971) was a Danish Jewish architect and designer, is the exemplar of the "Danish Modern" style. His architectural achievements are St Catherine's College, Oxford, work at Merton College, Oxford, the Radisson SAS Royal Hotel, Copenhagen, the Danish National Bank building in Copenhagen, as well as a number of town halls and other buildings in his native Denmark. Jacobsen has created a number of highly original chairs and other furniture. He has received several international distinctions and medals.

Many of Jacobsen's furniture designs have become classic, including the Ant chair from 1952 and the Swan and the Egg, which was both designed for the Radisson SAS Hotel. Jacobsen is, however, perhaps best known for the Model 3107 chair of 1955, known also as the "Number 7 Chair" which has sold over 5 million copies. The Number 7 chair is perhaps best known for being the prop used to hide Christine Keeler's nakedness in Lewis Morley's iconic portrait of 1963. Morley just happened to use a chair that he had in the studio, which turns out to have been a copy of Jacobsen's design. Since then, Number 7 chairs have been used for many similar portraits imitating the pose. His other visible contribution to pop culture in the media

is his flatware design, with right- and left-handed spoons in the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey, picked for the film because of its "futuristic" design. Another example of his work such as St Catherine's College, Oxford, his interpretation of a quadrangle-based college, has all the requisite elements: a quad centered on a lawn (a circle with one or two Cedar of Lebanon trees), student rooms (laid out in two long rows), a garden, a dining hall and SCR, Master's Lodgings, and a "feature" (in this case, a lily pond). His creativity did not end there; he also designed the original flatware, all of the furniture in the rooms, the locks and keys, the door handles, the sinks, the taps, and all the lights. Though only staircases 1 and 2 have the original and completed design (and his entire design originally was more extensive, with a three-story layout), the metal shower stalls and bathrooms are intact. It is also notable that the original paving is almost perfectly parallel and perpendicular to the buildings despite 30 years of wear.

ANALYSIS OF ARGUMENTS

Although in both journals Davies had different issues to discuss, but by analyzing it more deeply I found few topic which I belief those are the main topic of both journals. From the first journal (published in 1997), Davies trace back to the pre-world war II, which two exhibitions were held at Museum of Decorative Art in Copenhagen in 1928 and 1932.

In the first exhibition, Exhibition of English 18th-century furniture from Danish collections, it shows an indication that British furniture had a particular standing. In this event, the prominent English vernacular furniture, Windsor chair was considered a legitimate antique by Danish collectors and institutions and represented something of a treasured possession.



Picture 2.

English vernacular furniture, Windsor chair, taken from British Applied Art exhibition brochure in 1932.

Source: Davies, Kevin. (1997) "Twentieth Century Danish Furniture Design and the English Vernacular Tradition". Scandinavian journal of design history, vol. 7, pp. 41-57.

The other exhibition was held in 1932, British Applied Art, provides a broader context for the British influence on Danish design. It was an influential exhibition that becomes something of a benchmark for the comparison of Danish furniture. Steen Eiler Ramussen, as the organizer of this exhibition illustrated his view in exhibition's catalog, have said that "...at a remarkably early stage British applied art rejected all ornamentation that could be taken as a sign of class, and, insisted on quality. This is modernity that we can learn from". Ramussen decoded that English vernacular furniture was disinterested in class division, a point that is important given the social democratic leanings on Danish politics of the period.

Vice versa from the preceding journal, in the second journal (published in 1998), I could analyze what is the Scandinavian design in its British context. In here Davies stated that the Scandinavian design is often referred to as representing "the acceptable face of modernism" when compared with other modern product (e.g. imported from America).

Nevertheless, if we trace back to early 1930's, people in Britain were showing poor knowledge of Scandinavia. Although there were few writers written about Scandinavia, but still it depends on writer's opinion. Davies point out that some of the British writers seem to have left the realm of the objective far behind. They reflect a view of Scandinavia and its inhabitants that is substantially mythical. These perceptions were influence British people on that period. Although both United Kingdom and Scandinavian set in the same continents, but at that time the flow and access of information is severely limited, after the World War I many countries in Europe hit very hard, and had still recovered from big wars that divided societies a cross Europe. It is very unsurprised to see British misperception towards Scandinavian nations. Chauvinism might be one of the factors why the representation of Scandinavian was not easily accepted in Britain. Most of the older British generation had were very proud of their cultural heritage and tended to be very narrow-minded. So at that time the idea of modernism was not easily accepted and still considered against its cultural identity.



Picture 3.

Finmar advertisement showing Danish furniture on cricket field.

Source: Davies, Kevin. (1998) "Norwegian wood? Scandinavian Design in Britain 1950-65". *Scandinavian journal of design history*, vol. 8, pp. 81-93.

However, since Finmar established as wholesale and export company that specialized in importing Scandinavian goods - predominantly furniture, the perception began change. Finmar was not necessary emphasizing the product's feature, but more deeply, by continuously encoding the message "Finmar for the British way of life" as its marketing slogan, Finmar transmit a more extensive range of values by showing Danish furniture associated with a peculiarly British sport.

Compared with the first journal, which the British furniture was well known in Scandinavia through the exhibitions, books (Percy Macquoid, *A History of English Furniture*. London 1904-8; Herbert Cescinsky, *English Furniture from Gothic to Sheraton*, London 1929; both of these journals were cited by Danish cabinetmaker), formal education (e.g. the Furniture School of the Danish Academy of Fine Arts, run by Kaare Klint), so that the Danish people did not have misleading perception, it was not happen in Britain until Finmar conveyed correct message of Scandinavia trough its insistent advertising.



Picture 4.

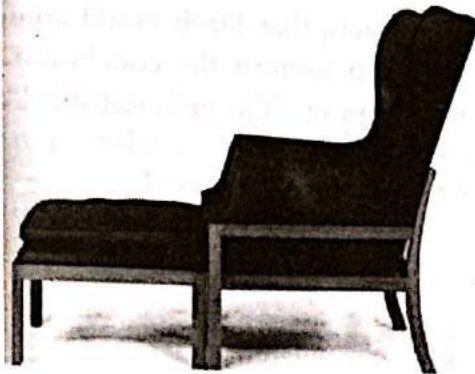
An English chair, made by Kaare Klint in 1932.

Source: Davies, Kevin. (1997) "Twentieth Century Danish Furniture Design and the English Vernacular Tradition". *Scandinavian journal of design history*, vol. 7, pp. 41-57.

Moreover, in the 1950's and early 1960's, people start to see the Scandinavian goods as modern, cosmopolitan and sophisticated, it was also suitably enlightened, rational and egalitarian. Interestingly, British people also does not recognized that the Scandinavian goods could came from different country, because in every slogan that Finmar (or other company which also import the Scandinavian goods such as Design of Scandinavia, the prospective InterScan) put in its advertising always came with a simple and more streamline phrase. It called itself as 'storehouse of Scandinavian furniture' rather than 'the best from Denmark or Sweden or Finland'. It made people noticed that Scandinavia was a cultural unit rather than diversity culture. Besides, although detailed promotional material produced by the company made it clear which country goods did come from, the fact that everything was displayed under the same roof and usually shown together at department store exhibition - as 'fine furniture from

Scandinavia'.

From both journals, explain that either Scandinavian goods that were put intrade in Britain or vice versa, were trade in high prices, nevertheless, the causes of these circumstances were different for each product.



Picture 5.

Wing-armchair, made by Holger Larsen, 1936.

Source: Davies, Kevin. (1997) "Twentieth Century Danish Furniture Design and the English Vernacular Tradition". *Scandinavian journal of design history*, vol. 7, pp. 41-57.

In Scandinavia, since the appearance of English style design shown at the annual Copenhagen Cabinetmakers' Guild exhibition in the late 1930's, the members of this exhibition were largely involved in the construction of more expensive pieces. The furniture exhibited was too expensive for home furnishing standards because the craftsmen were using hand production. The craftsmen at that time were fascinated with the characteristic of English furniture that had known as restraint craftsmanship. Unlike in the Scandinavian countries, the price of Scandinavian goods in Britain was trade with high price mostly caused by the Government regulations. Davies mentioned that during Second World War furniture production came under strict Government control, only 10% of firms were allowed productions permits. The utility regulations were controlled the dimensions, quality and cost of all import goods (After the war these regulations continued in forced until December 1952) and import controls restricted the import of furniture until November 1948. In the mid 1960's the Scandinavian design was decreased in demand because the high import tariffs that made the goods became more and more expensive.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

The quality of overall presentation considered to be relevant and inconclusive due to some aspects being discussed but showed no clear conclusion, the author also mentioned that the study that he present is only preliminary which can be expanded to other studies, however layout, typography and illustrations considered very good, as the author has successfully pictured very clear about the early stage of Scandinavian design in Britain. The illustration showed pretty clearly the reception of Scandinavian design in Britain to various interesting facts, figures and examples that create the readings very enjoyable.