

CHAPTER 3

Exhibiting Nordic Values: A Critical Look at the IKEA Store

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Abstract: IKEA proposes a distinct showroom experience for its stores globally—a successful model that is frequently imitated by competitors and widely analysed by academics. In this chapter, the IKEA showroom is considered as a cultural institution rather than a store: a museum of modern living. The 'IKEA Museum' is evaluated for its cultural impact, focusing mostly on the narrative that it offers to the visitor regarding his/her own role and agency in the Anthropocene. Drawing on authors such as Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, Carol Duncan and Naomi Klein, it is argued that the choices in showroom design and brand messages portray many known tropes of neoliberal culture, reducing the citizen to an individual consumer rather than empowering his/her political awareness. The chapter ends with a suggestive subversion of the current situation, as the IKEA showroom is briefly re-imagined as a more ethical and culturally responsible version of itself.

Keywords: IKEA store, product design, individualism, public discourse, corporate social responsibility

Introduction

It can truly happen to anyone: it is a Saturday morning in Oslo, you have nothing planned and just enough energy to do something pleasant and relaxing to leave the working week behind. So, you decide to visit the National Gallery once again: why not? It is nice to exchange looks with the same old masterpieces every now and then. In about two hours, though, the tour among the paintings is complete, and so is your morning. Now

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what? Well, it is kind of too soon to go back home: maybe you could check out what is on display at IKEA, just to spend some time, see if you need something (you always do), and then eat a snack in the cafeteria afterwards—it is so cosy.

A Museum of Contemporary Living

The IKEA store is one of a kind when it comes to retail strategies. The visitors are first met by the showroom section, with all the furniture well-arranged to stage possible living spaces, and only eventually does one find oneself in the more ‘commercial’ section, with the high shelves storing the products and the cash registers. The two spaces are clearly kept apart, usually on two different floors. Whereas the second part shares most of its aspects with any other store, the first one gives visitors a unique experience that cannot be described as mundane shopping. The products’ showcase is designed—or rather, curated—to convey significant messages through classic means of aesthetics. Like in a true exhibition, here you can see how your home would be if you lived in southern France; in the very next booth you can find the interiors of your small, yet optimally arranged condo on the docks; and hereafter, you are inside the spacious and glorious kitchen of your cottage on the fjord—you can already feel the warm atmosphere of the many guests you will definitely be having for dinner at this (your) place, while the children play upstairs. Like in a proper museum, the visitor follows the designed path from room to room, space to space, as the curator structured it with consistency and coherence, to prompt imaginative immersion and to build up meaning. The spectator’s gaze is more like that of a visitor than a buyer at first, as the experience is crafted to capture the attention and interest in understanding and being inspired by possible ways of contemporary furnishing. Moving from one diorama to the other, the product itself is not the protagonist. Rather, the showcase of opportunities to inhabit and the inspirational value they convey is. The act of consuming, although very relevant, is not directly addressed as the primary concern. Above all, what one finds is a soothing, reassuring feeling that there is a simple and nice solution to improve *your*, and mostly *your family’s*, life today, while the world mainly goes on outside of the safe space and the intimacy of your home.

Therefore, one could try to imagine the product showroom in IKEA stores around the world to be akin to the exhibitions of the museum tradition, just to see where this (not so) odd idea might take us. In short, any exhibition is crafted to convey a message, to create a narrative, and to persuade the visitors through the possibilities offered by visual rhetoric, material choices, space design, and textual information. But before hypothesising what the IKEA store exhibition is designed to tell us, and what its role is in the culture and public discourse today, one should ask what kind of exhibition it could be considered to be, given that it contains no unique or valuable work of art, but rather, some of the most commonplace and mass-produced objects one can think of.

On this matter, a reference to Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is due, especially regarding the distinction between the cultic value (*Kultwert*) vs the exhibition value (*Ausstellungswert*) of an object (Benjamin, 1968/1935, introduced in §§ 5–8). As a result of their absolute reproducibility, the rooms, the furniture, and the many 'smart' gadgets for your 'smart home' in the IKEA showroom find themselves entirely on the *Ausstellungswert* side of this opposition, lacking any cultic value and therefore any *Aura*, which characterizes original artworks. This indicates a remarkable difference to the way that visitors experience their own presence in an ordinary museum filled with unique works of art, where they would be invested by the aura of such pieces that still retain cultic value, while in a showroom like IKEA's, the visitor-object dynamic is not developed on this level but rather shaped around other ways.

Indeed, it could be argued—borrowing quite liberally from Carol Duncan's chapter 'The Art Museum as Ritual' (Duncan, 1995)—that as the visitor is wandering through the IKEA showroom, moving along the designed path, slowly advancing with the crowd, there is a feeling of some sort of ritual procession taking place. The experience comes across as something different from everyday shopping, as one cannot and will not rush for the item one needs, but rather feels one's gaze almost magnetically attracted by the different furnished booths, while one's imagination is hijacked and cannot help but picture the possible alternative lives one could have, for each style of furniture—as cited in the examples above.

An experience that could be genuinely considered as a public, artistic ritual, since it takes place in a space specifically designed to elicit this kind of *liminality*, as the visitor is both physically on the showroom floor and, at the same time, transferred by their own imagination to the fjord cottage, the condo by the docks, etc., while being in neither of these places. Moreover, it could be considered a ritual that is lived individually in the visitor's imagination, while also being truly collective, as all the visitors, day after day, go through similar imaginative processes, like different readers of the same novel. Even though the lack of cultic value makes visiting the IKEA showroom clearly different to wandering through the halls of a national gallery, it still feels like the visitor is walking around in what could be compared to a natural history museum, where the aura of unique works of art is usually weaker (or absent), but one is still exposed to a coherent narrative and, in this case, educated about a set of specific ways of living by the objects or reproductions on display. Indeed, this would not make the IKEA showroom any less significant as a means of cultural public elaboration—rather, it makes it a more pervasive and widespread one because of its constitutive reproducibility, in pushing forward, among other things, what are proposed to be ‘traditional Nordic values’, such as attention to functionality, form, and accessibility.

On this topic of showroom design and public communication, a few scholars have examined the matter by analysing IKEA's marketing and PR strategies. For example, according to Ursula Lindqvist, the IKEA showroom is an *archive* as defined by Jacques Derrida, that is, by referring to its origins in ancient Greek: a house for the documents that define the city. Or ‘a space that is both public and private and that signifies both political power and cultural authority’ (Lindqvist, 2009, p. 44). The ‘documents’ are replaced here by IKEA's products, which serve as models for possible lifestyles, while the exhibition design would be the intrinsic instrument of interpretation given unilaterally to the visitor. In Lindqvist's view,

The IKEA store helps construct, reproduce, and disseminate a narrative of Swedish exceptionalism worldwide. This narrative showcases Sweden's image as a peaceful, homogenous, and industrious little nation, exemplifying Enlightenment ideals of social and economic progress while avoiding implication in the Enlightenment's more violent aspects. (Lindqvist, 2009, p. 43)

One could argue that IKEA's exhibition speaks more generally to a globalised Western-oriented consumer, proposing once again a reassuring narrative: your individual right to make free choices in consumption regarding your own private life as independent, singular acts in the world. Join our values in 'The IKEA Concept of Life', which are embedded and reified in our products and, by doing so, you can not only improve your life personally, but also bring about social progress 'for the many', as in IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad's famous motto (Morsing & Roepstorff, 2015, p. 400). How? We are left to conclude that this will occur through a collective but disorganised action of consumption, a sort of 'invisible hand'-like social effect. So, on the other, darker side of this typically anthropocentric coin, 'the implications in the Enlightenment's most violent aspects' are not addressed, insulating the visitor's imagination from the harsh environmental and political realities of the Anthropocene.

Two Underlying Trails

This very last tendency goes hand in hand with a practice that is common with most global brands and the way their public image strategies play out. Although it must be noted that IKEA has recently been shifting towards embracing more direct responsibility and presenting itself as a front runner in the field of sustainable innovation, one still notices a distinct effort to reduce the environmental question (as with any other critical question of social justice) to the dimension of the individual consumer, leaving the social and collective nature of contemporary, highly interconnected crises out of the picture, and, more importantly, out of everybody's imagination. This trope has been widely studied, and different critics have concluded, as Naomi Klein pointed out, that 'for so many people it's so much more comfortable to talk about our own personal consumption, than to talk about systemic change, [and this] is a product of neoliberalism, that we have been trained to see ourselves as consumers first. [...] we've been trained to think very small' (Hanman, 2019). Thus, this common element reoccurs, as the denouncement of neoliberal ideology, in its various forms, once again enters the stage. While we ask why

the more systematic and comprehensive analyses of our anthropocentric times are not as widespread as they should be, these strategies and communicative choices come under the spotlight. In this regard, the IKEA exhibition can serve as an example of the pervasive conceptual practice of reducing the public discourse about the most poignant problems of the Anthropocene to a question of lifestyle and individual ‘green’ and ‘sustainable choices’, which can be useful and even individually necessary by themselves, but that are also evidently insufficient and inadequately self-exculpatory.

It is then clear, as one can infer from Klein’s conclusions, among many others, that if we can imagine the IKEA showroom as the public museum that it actually is, it could be negatively criticised as quite a significant agent of a twofold subtle cultural commitment to the *removal* and *negation* of key elements in the political consciousness of the many. Firstly, the anthropogenic causes of global inequality and the economic system of exploitation of natural resources in its innumerable facets are wilfully removed from the picture assembled on display. The obvious reason for this is that they could impair the crucial psychological process of customer loyalty development and customer identification with the brand, sparking some cognitive dissonance instead, which would thereafter impact on sales negatively. This removal becomes even more relevant when looked for in other global brands that focus their public image on being lifestyle ‘trend-setters’, especially in the tech industry where production is significantly outsourced to third party companies operating on the basis of work ethics of dubious morality (to put it mildly).

Secondly and most importantly, the IKEA museum enforces a considerable *negation* of the actual potential of individual and collective political agency of ordinary people, which is instead reduced to only one acceptable public dimension: consumption. In this way, the reduction of the concealed conflicts and contradictions of life, pain, death and nature in the Anthropocene to an act of reassuring consumption *de facto* negates the actual political power that the many citizens living under democratic rule essentially retain. The institution reverses the spread of a key aspect of political democratic consciousness by negating the collective dimension of thought-processing, public discourse and action, confining

everyone to the operative level of the individual as a customer instead. That is, things are the way they are because the current political and legal measures allow them to be, while it is within the possibility of collective engagement in representative democracy to implement, through coordinated political action, the sets of laws and regulations that would change, perhaps drastically, the way in which current practices of production and consumption occur. Thus, it could be claimed that it is time to counter this narrative of the neoliberal reduction to individual action, and to ‘think of change on a [big] scale’ (Hanman, 2019); to reappropriate the meaning of political agency as the duties of democracy address and control the way we want our community (and not simply the individuals) to live as a collective entity.

Is It Just a Matter of Design?

As noted before, IKEA has been implementing new policies to cope with its shortcomings in corporate social and environmental responsibility. Nevertheless, almost the entire focus of its exhibitions remains fixed on the consumer and his or her aspirations, not on our consumption and its place in the anthropocentric world. This is not surprising from a marketing standpoint, as, to quote Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, ‘design has never been about giving someone or some group what they ask for but what they wish they had asked for and retrospectively pretend that they did ask for’ (Colomina & Wigley, 2016, p. 103). So, the space for a wider representation of the social and environmental contexts of the products and our mindless consumption quickly becomes restricted, as it would be counterproductive to sales. Following on from this, the words of French designer Ora Ito are relevant. As Ito pointed out in a recent interview (J. De Missolz, 2017), it should be noted that in the 20th century (especially in the second half) design as a publicly relevant discipline has been a front runner agent in the promotion and global propagation of consumerism. It has been the cavalry of brand identity, of a model of production based on excess and sales targets in the millions. It has encouraged the idea of personal self-fulfilment through constant consumption. As for the 21st century, asks Ito, is design, instead, acknowledging its past role and readjusting its perspective? Are

designers today remedying the industrial excesses of the past by adopting a perspective in which producing better results means making the best with the least, rather than selling the most? Because Ora Ito thinks that they should, and at least some of them are, by coming up with innovative processes or products that improve existing value chains by implementing commendable practices of circular economy.

However, is this role in product design enough on its own to tackle the matters discussed here? Hardly, one could argue, as the topic at hand does not primarily concern the social and environmental sustainability of the product itself (which is, regardless, important in itself), but rather the ways in which it is presented, in showrooms or in advertisements, if we are to follow the premises set beforehand and consider these as a means to create a widespread, cultural, public effect. In fact, one could take as an example one of the innovative and sustainable solutions that IKEA's product designers have worked on in the last few years: the *Kungsbacka* kitchen. This product should be noted, as it not only uses recycled wood in its particleboard panels but is also covered with foil made from recycled plastic (PET) bottles, instead of the usual pristine, newly synthesised materials. Surely a brilliant technical result that, given IKEA's scale of sales, when globally adopted could and will have an impact on the economy of recycled materials. So, like many other 'green products' before it, the *Kungsbacka* kitchen is presented as one way in which IKEA is 'doing its part' to be a better actor in the multifaceted, global, ongoing economic and environmental crises. At the same time, it is not so subtly implied that the visitor, who is only engaged as a responsible consumer (whether in the showroom or via online marketing), should do his or her part by purchasing this new product, thus clearing him or herself of any residual, personal eco-guilt. The broader environmental, political, and socio-economical context that made the *Kungsbacka* kitchen a relevant product in the first place is, of course, strategically omitted from the showcased, curated corporate narrative. Why are one hundred billion PET bottles still used every year globally? (IKEA, 2021). Why are so many people still dependent on single-use plastic bottles? Why does only a privileged part of the global population have reliable access to clean tap water? Why are so many natural water sources worldwide polluted,

or privatised and inaccessible? Furthermore, one final question could be added: is this acceptable or should the current situation be changed? The inclusion of this kind of contextual information would serve as an honest wake-up call to the potential political agency of the visitor, once termed consumer, now called on to be an active citizen. Its wilful omittance, one could claim, is intended to carefully limit and control the visitor's level of awareness, thereby reducing, as argued, his or her status to that of a consumer without any political agency.

Profane What Is Sacred

Therefore, if one wanted to apply these reflections to IKEA's showrooms, the temptation to invoke what contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls a 'profanation' is significant and unavoidable. According to Agamben, 'to profane' (*profanare*) is to open up to new and heterodox uses of something that is originally separated from common control, something 'sacred' that can be looked at but not modified, like IKEA's exhibitions. An act of profanation 'deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized' (Agamben, 2007, p. 77), which in this case might make us imagine what a 'profaned' IKEA store showroom could look like. Beside the polished panels and surfaces of the furniture, new elements, pictures, texts, and textures could inform the spectator about the often-unspoken sides of mass consumption in the Anthropocene, like the harsh realities of job outsourcing to developing countries with weak workers' rights, the impact of cheap products on various local design and craftsmanship traditions in furniture manufacturing, or our relation as a species to the use of timber, the diversion of waterways, land-grabbing and more. Now this could be a form of repurposing for the better of such a powerful cultural means that the IKEA exhibition becomes the refurbishment of a significant *archive*, separating it from its original aim of marketing interest to promoting a more comprehensive and possibly systematic awareness of what it means to live a globalised life in the Anthropocene.

On the contrary, one could argue that it is not among IKEA's responsibilities to develop a healthy public debate on the many conflicts,

contradictions, and negative impacts inherent to the Anthropocene; IKEA should be making good, sustainable, and affordable furniture for a profit, and that is all. Which, in a liberal, capitalistic framework might even be a fair point. Furthermore, one could add, given the freedom of speech we are all endowed with, IKEA, as a private entity, is also entitled to use its marketing budget and arrange the products in its showrooms however it pleases, and build the public narrative that best fits its ends. This last claim, however, is more problematic. As the well-developed debate about the extension of First Amendment rights of corporations in the USA shows, the freedom of speech of multinational companies can hardly be compared to that of the individual citizen, and thus a different set of responsibilities should be considered, according to the scope of its potential influence, reach and credibility.

Structural Power Dynamics

Indeed, if looked upon as an exhibition, the IKEA store certainly is a very successful, relevant and influential one, as argued in these pages. With its hundreds of locations around the world (without including the impact of the catalogue and online contents) imposing their cultural presence, it is easy to recognise its dominant role in setting the pop-cultural standard for furnishing and interior design. For these reasons, one could conclude that those who are responsible for the showrooms and for building IKEA's corporate image and corporate public spaces should be held more accountable for the distortions and misrepresentations of our reality that are pursued in order to favour consumption while disregarding the vast majority of its consequences. After all, this is not only a question of educational opportunities. More importantly, it concerns addressing and taking responsibility for the ways in which the significant cultural means at the disposal of big corporations are used. Additionally, this is about recognising the central structural power that private entities have in the dynamics of public discourse.

In a democracy, in fact, the health of the public discourse is to be considered as one of the essential communal assets, and it should be kept in check and protected as one. Thus, this is not just about designing a

new, responsible IKEA showroom—even though an enterprise of this kind could achieve noteworthy results today, as Banksy’s *Dismaland* proved.¹ Rather, this is about properly recognising the power of the influence of private entities in the public political discourse and, subsequently, addressing the respective responsibilities in order to protect and promote this public asset. Which, in turn, is fundamental to securing the cultural atmosphere needed to bring about the possibility of significant change regarding the environmental crisis and socio-economic inequalities worldwide.

Of course, this is no simple task, and clearly not one which can be solved with just a few changes in showroom design. In this chapter, indeed, only some particular aspects of a much more complex situation have been criticised, and the only semi-serious intervention proposed is certainly not unproblematic. In reference to the main issue that would arise, one could argue that the addition of data and information on the products on display might further push the individualisation of the problem and reinforce the cultural frame by which environmental struggles are just a matter of consumer choice, thus bringing us back to the challenging starting point.

However, by adding this last argument to the ones made earlier, it becomes even clearer that these matters of public narrative, rhetoric and discourse deserve all the attention and critique that they are given today, considering their current relevance. As of now, in fact, the furnished rooms in the exhibition still have no windows and neither, it seems, does the case for its narrative, offering a pleasant retreat into the dream of a decent private life, shutting the rest of the world outside our walls and our concerns—which definitely is not a sustainable way forward.

1 In *Dismaland*, a 2015 installation in Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, Banksy recreated a dystopic version of a Disneyland theme park, recalling many of the original’s key features in a grotesque tone. With this creation, the artist offered an immersive monument of critique targeting the empires of influence held by private corporations, while at the same time providing the visitors with occasions for self-reflection.

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