

# **Envisioning versus realizing products for use in poor communities:**

## **The case of Victor Papanek and Nordic designers**

### **Abstract**

An increasing number of people is currently living under poor conditions in enclaves of rapidly growing urban areas. Many of them are of indigenous origin. They are in urgent need of basic equipment for living a healthy and decent life. The products have to be simple, cheap and acceptable to people with different cultural and geographical backgrounds. Methods to realize the design, production and implementation of such appliances is a matter of urgency. Therefore, the ideas of the Austrian-American designer Victor Papanek (1923-98) have gained new actuality. During the 1960s and 1970s Papanek played a significant role in the international design community. His ideal was the less polluting design traditions of indigenous people, made by simple methods in local materials. He had many supporters among design students in Scandinavia and Finland. Some of them tried to adapt their work practice to his ideology.

The aim of the paper is to investigate what impact his ideas had on the Nordic design community, and in particular, whether it was followed up by stakeholders and eventually reached the target groups in the third world. Success factors and failures are uncovered and discussed to clarify how the ideas might be utilized in today's situation.

The empiric study is based on literary reviews, and of interviews with designers in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The investigation shows that Papanek's ideas made a tremendous and lasting impact on designers in the Nordic countries including some of their work. Still, design and production for indigenous people in least developed countries seldom occurred, due to lack of contact with stakeholders. One of the few exceptions was the foundation of the Norwegian organization "Design without Borders", which was mainly financed by the government, i.e. by ways of political decisions.

In conclusion, without contact and cooperation with stakeholders, particularly the political and commercial sector, and users in the local communities on the other hand, it is not possible to realize ideas of this kind in the form of products and their use. The work of "Design without Borders" constitutes a good example of success, and should be used as a model for further work.

### **Keywords**

Victor Papanek, The Nordic countries, Indigenous design, Urban development, Design Without Borders

### **Introduction**

An increasing number of people is currently living under poor conditions in rapidly growing urban areas in most part of the world. Many of these people originate from indigenous societies with specific design and production methods. In their current situation they lack basic equipment for living a healthy and decent life. They are in need of affordable products that are adaptable to various cultural and geographical backgrounds. Methods to design, produce and make use of such appliances in a successful way is a matter of urgency. In this situation, the ideas of the Austrian-American designer Victor Papanek (1923-98) have gained new actuality.

During the 1960s and 1970s Papanek played a significant role in the international design community. The hot topic was the growing Western affluence and waist in contrast to the so called Third World's increasing poverty. His ideal was the less polluting design traditions of indigenous people of the non-Western world, made by simple methods in local materials. His basic idea of design was to create "survival kits" based on local indigenous traditions, with addition of Western competence, and disseminated through his book *Design for the Real World* (Papanek 1971). (Ill. 1.) He gained many supporters among design students in Scandinavia and Finland. Design from these countries was reputed for its democratic approach, innovative simplicity and use of natural local materials and handicrafts, which had a certain similarity with indigenous traditions. His long-time Finnish collaborator expressed it this way: "His basic message of design for social good was in line with the Nordic value systems basic idea of equality" (Sotamaa 2017). The Nordic approach constituted a platform for fruitful cooperation between Papanek and design students from this region. Some of them tried to adapt their work practice to his ideology, with little success. But his ideas lived on as a legacy that was integrated in much of the design thinking in this part of the world. It eventually reached the less developed world during the late 1990s, particularly by the contribution of the Norwegian organization Design Without Borders. The learning outcome of this is yet to be utilized in today's urban development.

The empiric study is based on literary reviews, interviews with designers in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, and with Papanek's last wife, Harlanne Roberts. The Victor J. Papanek Archive at the University of Applied Arts Vienna has also been consulted.

### **Papanek's ideas and practice**

Papanek was a child of Modernism and the Western design tradition. He was influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright's conception of modernity's close relation with nature and the environment. Likewise, his encounter with Richard Buckminster Fuller and his ideas of "making less for more" was groundbreaking for his conception of design as something that should facilitate everyday life. On the basis of these impressions and his engagement in environmental questions and the growing affluence in the Western world, he developed a new approach to design. His definition on the activity was broad, comprising both professional and lay persons and their shaping of the surroundings: "All men are designers. All that we do, almost all the time. For design is basic to all human activity. The planning and patterning of any act towards a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process" (Papanek 1971). At the same time he accused the designer profession of creating damaging, superfluous objects and contributing to an affluent consumption: "There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. ... By designing criminally unsafe automobiles

that kill or maim nearly one million people around the world each year, by creating whole new species of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed.” (Ibid.). Rather than designing superfluous products that stimulated consumption, his idea of design was to create objects that covered basic needs and could be manufactured locally by cheap or used materials. The users of such objects were those who needed it most, i.e. people in the so-called Third World, but should also earn as an example for products in the Second, i.e. the Western World (Ibid.).

In 1964 he got a position as leader of the Department of Art and Design at Purdue University of Indiana. A major part of his teaching consisted of letting the students design prototypes based on his ideas. He transmitted his provocative viewpoints in mass media by making TV programs and films, and thereby became known in the US as well as abroad. In the 1960s he got his first commissions for UNESCO, and thereby got an opportunity to realize his ideas for his main target group.

One of his most significant appliances was the Tin-Can radio of 1962 (Ill. 2). At this early stage he still had limited knowledge of design in indigenous cultures, and his solution was based on a Western idea. He had been asked by representatives of the U.S. Army to make a device that could deliver a radio signal to people living in remote parts of the world: Villages which were primarily illiterate, unaware of the fact that they lived in a nation-state, and had no electricity, money for batteries, or access to broadcast news. Papanek’s solution was to be made of a used juice can made of tin, with a burnt top made of copper fringed “antennae,” and connected with wires to a nail and radio transistor. It was a prototype solution by Papanek and one of his students. It was not a new invention. It had been around since the early 1930s and was often used by American Boy Scouts. But the message of the Papanek version was the promise of sustainability and the idea of implementation in the Third World (Gowan 2015). The tin can was able to act as a one-transistor radio, and it was non-directional, which meant it could only pick up one radio signal. Used tin cans were in abundance around the world, and the radio could be fueled by dried cow dung, paper, wax, or generally anything else that caught on fire. The heat produced would then rise to the top, and was converted to energy which would power an earplug speaker. Its manufacturing cost was 9 cents. It should function as a communication device for preliterate areas of the world, and was given to the U.N. for use in villages in Indonesia (Catanese 2017). The decoration was to be done by the local users, but out of the two examples of which there is photographic documentation, made by an Indonesian user, one followed Papanek’s preferred colour scheme of black, white and red. How many, if any of these radios that were actually produced and how they were received by the users, is not known. That was not of Papanek’s primary concern. Making a radio that worked was seen as an act of empowerment of those who made it (Gowan 2015).

### **The encounter with the Nordic countries**

As a representative of the American Environmental Movement, which got much attention among design students in the Nordic countries, Papanek and Buckminster Fuller were invited by the Scandinavian Design Students Organisation (SDO) to a seminar on work environments at The Institute of Industrial Art in Helsinki, Finland (later Aalto University) in 1967. The initiative came from Yrjö Sotamaa, who later became a leading figure in Finnish design

education (Sotamaa 2017.) Papanek's charismatic contribution, performed with great rhetoric skill and also a sense of humor, constituted a breakthrough of his radical views, and gave him a status as "guru" among the students. It led to a series of invitations to the design schools in the Nordic countries. Nonetheless, the interest and impact varied from country to country.

The visit to Finland in 1967 was his first to the Nordic countries. The workshop was a great success, and he made a strong impression on the students. He later visited the country several times to lead studio workshops at the Institute and even in the Finnish woods to create survival kits of local materials. Sotamaa expresses his influence in this way: "Victor inspired his young audiences to prototype his ideas. ... The first one was "Play environment for handicapped people".... The second one was a mobile reindeer slaughter house for Lappland, thereby designing for the indigenous *sami* minority group and making use of their indigenous traditions.

The projects received a lot of media publicity and students were inspired to continue working with Victor's ideas like myself" (Ibid.) His acquaintance with Sotamaa, who later became head of the design department at Aalto University and one of the most influential persons in Finnish design, developed into a lifelong friendship and directed the Finnish design approach.

Sweden was the country where his message most clearly led to a broad dissemination of his ideas (Söderholm 2008). At his first visit to The University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm in 1968, he held an eight hours speech, which created both disgust and enthusiasm. Some were provoked by his radical views, others reacted positively and immediately approved to his views and way of presentation. To the textile student Maria Benktzon his message constituted an "eye opener to the world" (Benktzon 2017). It lead her to change her direction from textile to industrial design, to create ergonomic everyday tools. His message had similar impact on other of the students. As for designing for the less Third World it was something they wished to do, but it was not possible at that point of time (Ibid.). Papanek's invitation was initiated by the design student Olof Johansson. He also helped him to get in contact with the publishing house Bonnier, which published the very first edition of his book *Design for the Real World, Miljö för Miljonerna*, at Bonniers in 1970 (Papanek 1970). At the other hand, the impact was reciprocal. Like in Finland, where he made use of indigenous traditions, he took interest in Swedish vernacular design, like wooden shoes (Papanek 1970).

Papanek probably visited Norway for the first time in 1969, where he gave a lecture at the Oslo College of Art and Design (now part of the Oslo National Academy of the Arts). It was received with mixed feelings by the audience. Several of the teachers reacted negatively, while the students were enthusiastic. One teacher explicitly hinted that he might be a delegate from an Eastern block country. Still, Papanek was "completely calm and sober-minded and greatly fertilized the 1968 generation's desire to break with the conformal and nurtured the question of how and what we designed: Shortly, about taking in a broad social design responsibility" (Gusrud 2017). He definitely made a deep impression and was invited back several times.

The work of the furniture designer Terje Ekstrøm was probably inspired by Papanek, like his loudspeakers with hexagonal forms (Ibid.). Most of the impact seems to have been of a more general kind, feeding the wish to design with social awareness and with an increased concern about the poorer parts of the world. That was the case with the design student Peter

Opsvik, who later became one of Norway's most influential furniture designers. After a long period of planning he in 2001 was the initiator of the foundation of the organization *Design without Borders* (DWB). The aim of the organization was to utilize design expertise to make highly needed and useful products in the Southern hemisphere (Ramberg and Verdu-Isachsen 2012). Since then the mainly officially funded organization has executed projects in Uganda, Guatemala and other countries in Africa and Latin America. Several of them have been successful. The organization is still active. It constitutes one of the most prominent examples of what the ideas of Papanek has contributed to as regards its main target group. However, one should have in mind that only Papanek, but the whole Environmental Movement was an inspiration source for the initiative.

The foundation and further existence of DWB was also a result of Opsvik's economic contribution (Ramberg and Verdu-Isachsen 2012). He had made commercial success of his ergonomic furniture, often in natural materials. They were in line with Papanek's ideas. But in contrast to Papanek, he was willing to cooperate with private enterprises and work on commercial conditions, an ironically, therefore able to contribute to realizing his ideas.

It seems that his message made less impact in Denmark. It was mainly his ideas of sustainability, not so much those of the significance of indigenous design that was appreciated. He visited Denmark in 1973, in the aftermath of the 1968 revolt. He was a visiting professor at the Department of Industrial design at the Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen, and stayed for several months. He was invited by Professor Erik Herløw, one of the leading figures in Danish industrial design, who also had his own design studio where he worked on the ideas of sustainability. Papanek held lectures and led workshops, and was once interviewed in a TV program (Højlund 2017). He enjoyed the teaching, even the left wing political setting and the relaxed attitude. He has left the following humorous account: "Eight or nine students and a teacher sat around a table making drawings and working on a project while 30 or 40 other students taking the class sat around them on the floor, reading, smoking pot, and eating potato chips." (Gowan 2015).

According to one of the students, "the exiting thing about Papanek was his consciousness about global resources, and the examples of it that he integrated in his assignments. This was a basic attitude that was in accordance with the one at our department. ... He was an inspiring lecturer, but at the same time part of a shred in our consciousness about the fact that resources were scarce." (Ibid.)

Papanek was a devoted and successful mediator of his ideas towards design students. But he never promoted them towards business enterprises or other commercial stakeholders, nor to politicians. The efforts to realize his and his students' prototypes were limited to projects in the less developed world organized by UNESCO and WHO. Instead of putting them in production, they were freely given to have the broadest and most beneficial effect possible. An example is his work for WHO in Chad, Niger and Cameroon, where prototypes of a village-made clay pipe production machine were made. They were not manufactured, just constructed and demonstrated in villages so that people could produce clay pipes to move water and waste as needed (Roberts 2017). Consequently, little is known about how they were received by the local communities and whether they were actually manufactured and used. There is no evidence of following up of the projects or evaluation of their impact (The Victor J. Papanek Archive 2017).

The approach was in accordance with and a consequence of his ideas of leaving it to the local communities to produce and make use of the appliances. However, there is no indication that the communities made use of or developed the prototypes into products. Papanek himself paid no attention to what happened after he had left, he regarded that as something that should be left to the local inhabitants. Consequently, there is reason to believe that his ideas were not realized in the communities they were intended for. The main outcome was that Papanek had enjoyed these visits and was given the opportunity to learn about the local cultures and thereby develop his ideas and prototypes in collaboration with his Western students. He even brought a collection of their objects to his home in the USA (Gowan 2015). The general outcome of these undertakings in the Third world was that little or nothing was produced or used, and the learning outcome was mainly that of Papanek himself. Consequently, the original problem that the prototypes were designed to improve, remained unsolved. Moreover, his views remained controversial and unpopular among the establishment, which is proved by the fact that by his death, his obituary was refused to be published by The New York Times (Gowan 2015).

Even though his ideas were scarcely implemented in the less developed world, his ideas, infused with the attitudes he met in the Nordic countries, became part of the common ideology in the design community. He also updated his ideas by revising his seminal book (Papanek, 2006), and published new titles, particularly *The green Imperative* (Papanek 1995). Still, his main attitude remained the same. During the flourishing of the left wing political movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s the Scandinavian design students claimed him for his choice to stay out of politics (Savola 2015), but stayed true to his original ideology. Designers should be social aware, but remain politically unaffiliated (Smith et al. 2016). In a historic perspective this may be regarded as unrealistic, romantic or arrogant. With his intervention in and presentation of solutions to indigenous people, he might also be accused of having Post-colonial views. Nonetheless, his ideology has achieved status as classical.

### **The present situation**

More than five decades have passed since Papanek's ideas were disseminated in the Nordic countries. His legacy might seem to belong to a historic past, with little relevance to our contemporary society. However, there are obvious similarities. One of today's main challenges is environmental control on a global scale, as well as the acknowledgement of the value and innovative use of various cultural traditions. That is very close to what Papanek was occupied by. The paramount issue of contemporary design is to find ways to meet the challenge of sustainability on a global scale in societies of highly divergent cultures and economic status. His ideas are therefore more relevant than ever. Consequently, there is reason to ask what we can learn from his way of thinking and working. What were the success factors and what were the failures? How can we utilize the experiences and adapt them to the present situation?

Papanek represented the first generation of The Environmental Movement in design. His role was that of introducing the topic, and of how Western designers should meet the environmental challenge. His engagement and charisma, and his groundbreaking book made his venture a great success, particularly among students in the Nordic countries. In the Nordic countries he met a Social democratic tradition that comprised a certain awareness and use of

design as a tool to create practical everyday products, supported by official politics. Additionally, a few designers were already acquainted with the environmental movement. This made it easy to create mutual understanding and lasting impact. In this way he could also strengthen his own competence and his status as an international authority in the field of human centered and environmental friendly design. His views included were precursors for approaches that were later coined as *universal design*, *participatory design*, *circular design*, *eco design* and *green design*. He paved the way for solutions to our present problems by animating the next generation of design students.

His attitude towards people of the Third World was quite different. During his visits to the less developed world he was able to get in-depth knowledge of indigenous cultures and their design traditions by studying them *in situ*. In this way he could develop his own ideas and introduce them to his audience in the Western world. But there is no evidence that he included these people, whose skills were his ideal, in the design process. Probably they were not engaged the problem definition, or asked whether they saw any conditions that needed improvement. The reason might be that he did not want to interfere with a tradition that was not his own, or a certain Western arrogance. Whatever the reason, the lack of realization of the ideas in the less developed world constitutes a major shortage of his approach. Thereby the main target group had no immediate improvement of their living conditions.

Further, his ideology prevented interference with commercial enterprises or other stakeholders who might facilitate production and implementation in these communities. Papanek either neglected this fact or refused to revise his ideology. The same was the case with political parties and authorities, both in the Third and the Western world. The next generation of designers was left with the challenge of realizing his ideas by finding a way between in the often contradictory fields of commercial, political and ideological interests.

The increasing globalization process that has been going on after his retirement has paved the way for and enhanced the possibilities for realizing his ideas. Today, many enterprises are global activities, and competence in cooperation with local stakeholders has increased considerably. This makes it easier for designers to work with and for local communities, although seldom on an ideological basis.

One of the more successful examples is the work of the previously mentioned Norwegian organization Design Without Borders. It was founded by the architect Peter Butenschøn, who had several international connections in the Environmental Movement, with Peter Opsvik as the main driving force behind the idea (Opsvik 2012). In 2002 the inauguration was finally a fact. The work consisted of design projects in communities with particular need for development aid, mostly Uganda and Guatemala. Several of the projects have turned out to be successful, and the organization still exists. The work is based on close collaboration with national or national development aid organizations, the local inhabitants and municipal authorities as well as business enterprises over a long period of time (Skjerven 2017). Today the organization is mainly financed by governmental development grants, and it is cooperating with private business enterprises. The projects that comprised close cooperation with the local municipality and the citizens were the most successful (Ibid.). This collaborative model is the main success factor of the organization and the reason why it still is operative. It stands in strong contrast to Papanek's views of non-interference with politicians, business enterprises and inhabitants, and displays the weakness of his stance.

The situation today is that indigenous cultures not only exist where they originate. Due to the increasing urbanization and immigration, they exist within Western cities. The Third World problematics have been extended to the Western world. Along with an accelerating gap between rich and poor, this has caused social problems that need to be solved. The UN Sustainable development goals (The UN Development Goals 2015) are at the global political agenda, and there is a certain political pressure to achieve results. This means that the market for design competence in the field of sustainability has increased. Designers who are able and willing to negotiate or cooperate with various stakeholders have the opportunity to realize their ideas, although transformed, further developed or even compromised in accordance with the political and economic circumstances and local conditions. There is reason to believe that the success factors of Design Without Borders are transferable to this situation, although the work of the organization does not comprise projects in the Western world.

## Conclusion

Papanek's ideas made a tremendous and lasting impact on design students in the Nordic countries. Through his engaged lectures and workshops he made them realize the value of indigenous cultures with their focus on basic needs, simple materials and production by ways of simple tools. He demonstrated their global relevance, and their significance for a sustainable development. At the other hand, as he refused to communicate with the world of business of politics, and to engage the users in the design process, he prevented his ideas to be realized. The work of Design Without Borders has proved that a successful implementation is dependent on those factors.

In the present situation, his ideas are relevant for solving the problems of multicultural urban areas in most parts of the world, even Western. They need to be added by a pragmatic and cooperative attitude that secures involvement in and cooperation with politicians, business enterprises and users. This constitutes one of the main challenges of the designers of today and tomorrow. Design for the real world has to be created *in* the real world, with all its cultural, social, economic and political contradictions.

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