

The Professionalization of Product Design: Reflections on the Finnish Case

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, we have witnessed the growth and proliferation of professional product design in across the globe (Lorenz, 1990). Product design has emerged as a key carrier of discourses relating to business and management (Margolin 1988), and has become an established part of transnational networks of innovation systems that were until that point highly particularized to national innovation systems. While the roles of design in global discourses and national systems are beginning to be generally understood, the particular *processes* of professionalization have up to now received less research attention than have the role of design in discursive and innovation systems, however (see Valtonen 2007).

In this paper, we intend to clarify the similarities and differences of various sets of theory -- professional, organizational, and cultural theories -- and to use Finnish product and industrial design to exemplify these similarities and differences. We take most of the established literature on professionalization (e.g. Larson 1977; Abbott 1988; McDonald 1995) and on organizational theory (Scott 2001, DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Meyer and Rowan 1977) and design as a point of departure. We also look for fresh inspiration in the research of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and those who have followed his method. We take it that many of the institutional processes and outcomes in Finland may appear to resemble those in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, those in the UK and the U.S., as well as those in France, but we do not focus on that here. We accept that that the Finnish case contains specific traits of its own that are due, for example, to Finland's peculiar historical position between the West and the Russian/Soviet Bloc, but we push that also to the background at this stage of our inquiry. Bearing both the current both vagueness of the generalizability and the limitations of study in mind, we focus here on what we regard as the characteristic features and essential turning

points in the development of design in Finland. We set out to answer a general question: what kinds of processes have characterized the professionalization of design? We specify ways in which designers in Finland over the last 50 years or so have created and institutionalized a key position for themselves as representing a specific profession in the context of their own particular local society and economy. At one level, the focus in this paper is to characterize the Finnish experience and, at least seminally, prepare the ground for comparison of this with other countries. At another level, and more importantly, we use our evidence to assess the potential applicability of two or three research traditions that have all been only seminally touched upon in design research: 1. professionalization research and 2. theories of professions as a variant of a) the diffusion of world society, in general, and b) professional models of organization and management, in particular. Our way of combining ideas from such scholars as Larsen and Abbott, in the first instance, and from Pierre Bourdieu, W. Richard Scott and John Meyer, in the second instance, provides us a bridge to research that has been carried out in other professions such as medicine, law, professional management, management consulting, academia, and business journalism.

Next, we will provide a review of the existing literature, and follow this with a brief historical account of our empirical data. Finally, we will offer some conclusions based on our analysis to suggest why and how the case of Finland appears to generate insights that may be of general interest for anyone studying product and industrial design, professionalization, or both.

PROFESSIONALIZATION AND DESIGN

The traditional approach to the study of professionalization in any field has been to examine the emergence and institutionalization of a new profession in relation to the national system of regulation, the norms created and nurtured in professional associations, and the system of education preparing graduates for the profession concerned (Abbott 1988). A general view for most professionalization theorists is that professions are organised bodies of experts who apply esoteric knowledge to particular cases. They are an occupational group with some special skill, usually an abstract one, which requires extensive training. They therefore have elaborate systems of instruction and training, with entry by examination and other formal prerequisites. Skill is not applied in a purely routine fashion, but requires a revised application case by case. In addition, professions are more or less exclusive. Often a code of ethics or behaviour is also emphasized (see for example Abbott 1988: 4, 7).

The most traditional way of studying professions has been through the so-called functional theories of how to reach professionalism, which have come in two main variants: a *trait approach* and an *evolutionary-path approach* (Wilensky 1964, 142; see also Hughes 1963; Parsons 1951). On the one hand, the trait approach typically lists some of the traits that a proper profession should have, such as (see, for example, Rinne & Jauhiainen 1998: 7):

1. A high level of (theoretical) education.
2. An important social role, including responsibility and ethics.
3. Autonomy, often on the basis of regulatory measures taken at the level of the nation-state.
4. Control of producers in terms of who has entrance to education and is considered competent.
5. Control of education in terms of specialization of skills, knowledge, and qualifications.
6. Intellectual properties, scientific knowledge, and a professional language of one's own.
7. A strong professional organization

In turn, theories on evolutionary paths to professionalization have considered that there are several traits that are typical to a profession but that these traits are by no means given but rather follow from following particular pathways and picking up of such qualities on the way. Harold Wilensky lists

several “states” or stage-gates that an occupation has to pass before it can in his view be considered a profession (Wilensky 1964: 142–146). He argues that these states or steps can then be mapped and dated in order to define whether or not an occupation is (yet) a profession. General to Wilensky’s evolutionary professionalisation theory is the notion of an *ideal* condition, an ideal type for the particular profession, towards which members of the particular profession are seen by him to strive, even when the members and the emerging profession may never reach this point, due to various social, technological and conditions of their evolution (see Heskett 1980 for such struggle in the case of industrial design).

The trait and evolutionary-path approaches have been explicitly combined by some scholars. Philip Elliott draws a diagram of the continua in the professional ideal type between non-professionals and professionals (Elliott 1972: 96.). He defines nine axes on which the professional practices can be positioned: knowledge, tasks, decision-making, authority, identity, work, career, education, and role. Elliott further divides that professions represented on such a diagram can for analytical purposes, at a particular point in time and space, be divided into (high-) “status professions” and (low-status) “occupational professions” (Elliott 1972). In the pre-industrial society that prevailed until the 18th century, neither occupation nor education was as important in determining status. At least in Anglo-American cultures, officer corps, medicine, law and the church were the obvious high-status professions that replenished their troops mainly by recruiting younger sons of the gentry (Elliott 1972: 26, 28–29, 31). During the 19th century, however, great many new occupations emerged. A man’s occupation became a key indicator of social position, and traditional categories of social class determined by birth rights accordingly became less important. Education and occupation became inherent parts of the identity and to claims of the new middle class that positioned itself distinct from the clergy and the military and precisely in between the gentry and the peasants and non-skilled workers. For the occupational professions, education, professional training, and specialisation became hallmarks of their identity and position, in contrast to the ideal of a broad cultural understanding with members of the gentry (Elliott 1972: 53).

Konttinen (1991) has shown that the the social conditions in the 19th century in Finland, also, were similar to the economic and social conditions identified in Anglo-American countries, as predicted by Elliot. In Finland, first, the army and the clergy and, later, law and medicine, were the obvious educational choices for those members of the upper classes of society who desired to enlighten themselves (Konttinen 1991). The social status and traditions of the family affected educational choice more than did inherent talent, independently acquired expertise, or educational competence.

These theories of professional development based on traits and evolutionary paths can in the research tradition of Elliot be synthesized as an evolutionary description of events and ‘acquired traits’ from the moment when individuals start practising tasks characteristic until a moment when an occupation and a time when high professional status may be gained. The aim in this Elliotian research tradition has been to find a common story or an archetypical professional path that would apply to all professional groups at all times (Abbott 1988: 12).

Critics to the Elliotian research tradition accept its advantages in terms of understanding professional development but underling that five key assumptions in this research were long hidden: 1. that change would be unidirectional and always evolve towards a given form structurally and culturally, 2. that the evolution of individual professions would be independently from other professions, 3. that the social structure and cultural claims of a profession would be more important than the work it does, 4. that professions would be homogeneous units, and 5. that professionalisation as a process would not change with time (Abbott 1988: 17).

To make these assumptions explicit, scholars of professional development have recently begun to view professions has taking place in the context of society and markets, and as a process striving to achieve a monopoly in delivering and charging for their services (see, for example: Brennan 1997; Larson 1977; Konttinen 1991). The finding of this research stream is that occupations strive to and can reach a monopoly through *social closure*, a term that was originally introduced by Max Weber. Weber also defined the concept of *Kulturmensch* (a cultural being) whereby a human subject is the constructors of his own set of values and meanings (Brennan 1997: 15–20.). Weber originally used

Kultur Mensch to describe a professional who is, similarly to Elliott's high status professionals, a representative of the higher social classes. The opposite of this type was the *Fach Mensch* approach, where occupation specific education was emphasised. According to the concept of social closure, individuals and groups seek to protect and improve their socio-economic situation by restricting access by other to scarce resources and privileges (Brennan 1997:196). Typical examples of this approach are universities of technology and economics (Kontinen 1991: 26). The result will be a position between the sublime, general cultural approach and the more specific, occupational approach has resulted in an interesting tension between art and industry (see Abbott 1988). The *Fachmench* approach is a particularly valid strategy for acquiring social closure and to generate abstract knowledge in industrial design. However, consider that at the Bauhaus school of art and design, for example, the aim of education was to create a "cultivated" person, with very little occupation-specific education but with a broad cultural base. This fact makes design a particularly interesting profession to study.

Larson sees any *professional project* as being executed with two goals in mind: market control and social mobility. The means and resources to establish and secure market control vary depending on the practice. Larson notes seven structural elements as the most favourable conditions for the professional project of market control: 1. *the nature of the service that is marketed*, 2. *the type of the market*, 3. *the type of clientele*, 4. *the cognitive basis*, 5. *the production of producers*, 6. *power relations* and 7. *affinity with the dominant ideology*. For each of the structural elements, Larson gives a description of what the ideal condition for that particular area could be. These are acquired in various degrees and can be seen as stages towards a steady state, which Larson sees as a high status profession. The steady state can be said to remind of Wilensky's ideal state.

In partial contrast to Larson and Wilensky, Abbott considers the link between a profession (the collective) and its work (by individuals and in groups) as the central phenomenon of professional life, a phenomenon he calls *jurisdiction*. To analyse professional development is inherently, in his view, to analyse this link, in particular, because the jurisdictional links between one profession and another will in his view determine the evolutionary paths of the individual professions. According to Abbott, there is no fixed structure towards which all professions tend; rather, professional projects will in large part

be shaped by the environments over which these professions try to shape on the basis of their capabilities for jurisdiction.

In this view, a profession will experience a process of *differentiation* of offerings and of clients typically appears when demand suddenly outstrips available professional capacity to serve clients with commodity offerings. In industrial design, the most typical example is differentiating between the consumer business and the business-to-business area, between consumer products and investment goods. Differentiation can break away from the traditional internal, external or both kinds of boundaries of the profession. When a profession is mature and successful, especially, Abbott's analysis suggest that it will be constantly subdividing under the various pressures of market demands, specialisation, and interprofessional competition. Note here that Abbott has focused more on the defensive or reactive strategies of professions in terms of differentiation, rather than such differentiation of cultural forms as an offensive or proactive part of the process of professionalization in its emergent phase. Indeed, Abbott's system of professions theory has been criticised for considering the professions to act as if in a closed system. The critics, such as Keith MacDonald, consider professions to function in a world where conflict and collaboration will include various other parties than other professions, such as non-professionals, clients, and the state.

Professions according to Abbott develop in a structured pattern that he refers to as a "system". A move by one profession inevitably affects the others. Chain reactions in the system of professions start either with external forces such as when changes in technology or organization open or close areas for jurisdiction, or when other existing or new professions seek new ground. These changes lead to chains of disturbances that move through the system until they are absorbed either by the professionalisation of a group or by internal restructuring of one or more existing professions.¹

¹ The central questions are what forces initiate the disturbances, how and how far the disturbances propagate, and how they typically end. In general, externally induced changes are more influential than the reasons initiated by professions.

BOURDIEU AND THE DESIGN AND THEORIES OF ORGANIZATIONS

To address offensive or proactive expansion and differentiation of professional boundaries, our analysis here is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's research. Our approach is a complex one, however, in that we diverge also to some extent from Bourdieu's approach. We follow ideas of organization theory and design (Scott 2001) to emphasize that professionalization is a process where an occupation strives to create, expand, and maintain its area of exclusivity within a network of similar occupations and professions seeking to do the same. Critical here that non-professional occupations borrow methods and processes from established professions to emulate characteristics and gain legitimacy and status (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The occupations and professions in these networks of similarity cannot all be headed for the same necessary destination, nor is position at any one time secure. However, they follow similar models so as to, for all practical purposes, to *appear* to do so (Meyer and Rowan 1977). The outcome are various processes of coalition building, trial balloons, retreats, negotiation, bargaining, compromise, temporary settlement, etc (Hargadon and Sutton 1997, Scott 2001). Any process of professionalisation in this view will build on institutional and power considerations -- as much as on the functional, technical or rational factors that traditional professionalisation theory has emphasized (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Our approach thus both complements and departs from the traditional approaches to professionalization and from the work of Bourdieu and of those most faithful to his method. In this paper we do not pretend to make a rigid application of any established conceptual and methodological tools in relation to the field of product design. This said, our approach is most inspired by Bourdieu's work in, for example, bearing in mind his repudiation of the uncritical use of the term 'profession' (cf. Ainamo, Tienari and Vaara 2007).

Two selective readings of the work of Bourdieu and his colleagues brings this work quite near to the core literature on the system of professions by Abbott and his colleagues. The first of these is to say that any talk of 'profession' is a discourse mainly serving to enhance the selfidentity of those involved. In both research by Bourdieu and by Abbott, talk and discourse are portrayed as strategies

for accumulating capital specific to a particular domain that then becomes institutionalized as a particular 'professional field' for those involved and those not involved. Another selective reading is that Bourdieu's early work was in fields such as cultural production and academic production. Within this reading, spanning the outermost boundaries outwards and bringing barriers to entry ever closer to the most inward core are relevant parts of almost any collective project.

We build Bourdieu-inspired analysis on the premise that the product design in terms of its professionalization is both reminiscent of and of other cultural fields and different from them. In our view, a new genre of culture or professional discourse will generally develop by way of individual practitioners or small groups who are able to set new examples that attract followers in the field. We take it that individual and collective actions and language and discourse of professionalization may develop in tandem, apart from these actions, or both. We take it that, like other occupations and professions and other cultural fields, design originated from systems of apprenticeship and professional associations. The origins and dispositions of the earlier generations may still serve as the *ideal* for those coming after. The 'ideal' concept, as it is used by Bourdieu, refers to the set of integrated institutionalized beliefs that functions as a semibarrier to entry for anyone wishing to enter the profession. This ideal acquires practical significance by way of such social mechanisms as education and training. It affects those who enter design discourse and, thus, the field to which this discourse is related. It affects those who accept the status quo, as well as those who attempt to establish a new genre within the discourse. Thus, the ideal of the field can have the effect that all designers operating in the field 'must' share specific norms, values and practices. These are specific to the field and may evolve over time. As a result of various processes of socialization, the *habitus* or dispositions of aspirant or member of the field prepare and guide him or her cognitively toward sensing, perceiving, thinking, and acting.

Central to Bourdieu's method in all its applications are two main arguments. First, any institutional field is semiautonomous from other fields with its own "*rules of the game*" and a particular "*economy*" of exchanges and rewards *vis-à-vis* other fields. Essential to these exchanges are also various forms of capital – cultural, social, economic – that are accumulated over time and

available for the actors concerned. A frame of reference of this kind provides a link between the design field and the economic and political fields in that their interfield relations are central to an understanding of the role that designers have played, and now play, in society.

In the design field, important will be, for example, the cultural capital that established design professionals possess, the social capital that is connected with the relationships between them and their clients, and the economic capital whose role is becoming stronger as design becomes increasingly profit-oriented. We have collected data on design and its professionalization as well as related phenomena through archival and other parts of the historical method. Here, we focus on the role of leading economic and social phenomena in which design was embedded in the second half of the 20th century, as well as on the role of champion firms, such as Nokia, Metso, and Suunto.

PRODUCT, INDUSTRIAL AND STRATEGIC DESIGN IN FINLAND

The history of industrial design in Finland is interlinked with the general socio-economic development of the country. In the 1950's and 1960's Finland was a poor nation, it had suffered in the Second World War, it did not receive any Marshall aid and, moreover, paid great war indemnities to the Soviet Union. The government and the local actors in the economy and society used design to emphasize the national identity and amend the poor economical situation. The expression "Finnish Design" was created as a label for marketing Finnish design products abroad, and the value of the brand was provided substance and cultural and symbolic value by individual designers such as Kaj Frank, Tapio Wirkkala, Timo Sarpaneva, Ilmari Tapiovaara and Alvar Aalto. Many of the products were tableware or artefacts in glass or wood. Design gained great success in international competitions and was extensively discussed in press (Kalha 1997, Kruskopf 1989, Ratia 1962). The first industrial designers were educated in 1965. The contemporary ideology was that the purpose of design was for objects to be in elitist exhibitions but, rather, the purpose of objects was to function anonymously in everyday use. This ideology reflected a people's democratic movement that was typical for the left-wing politics of the time. Ergonomics became the main thing to think, given attention to children, the

elderly, and the disabled, who were now for the first end-users in “design for all” (Sarpaneva & Bruun 1975: 112, Ahola 1978: 74). This kind of anonymous design was introduced in public transportation in the form of Helsinki metro, designed by Börje Rajalin and Antti Numesniemi (Balint 1991: 134). In the 1980s, the economy flourished and hedonic consumption became an accepted past-time for citizens. Much of the design efforts focused on styling of products. In the early 1990s, the rise and fall of bilateral Soviet trade (Kalela et al. 2001) led to a competency trap in many Finnish corporations that had exported commodities in volume to the Soviet market without much concern of consumer behaviour, consumer preferences or, in more cases than one, product quality. Finland experienced a major recession. Finnish industrial corporations were in a completely new situation where they had to compete on Western markets that operated on the basis of a different set of rules of the economic game.

Thus, the strong recession of the early 1990s showed Finnish companies that they could no longer afford to compete in the same way as before, but needed to modernize their strategic tools. Industrial design emerged as one of these new strategic tools. The demand for industrial design was greatest in the rapidly growing “the electronics industry” , where Nokia’s mobile phones required new material, visual, and software interfaces (Pulkkinen 1997).

New technologies and organizational changes, in particular, create potential jurisdiction both rapidly and often. In industrial design, the most prominent example of a development path like this was that of the computer modelling experts. Changes in organisations created and destroyed traditional boundaries for jurisdiction in industrial design with demands for user interface design, a specialization originally initiated through the introduction of new technology in organizations. Today, industrial design and graphic design work in parallel with the same problems in many organisations, within the area of Human Computer Interaction (hci), and in the future, their jurisdiction may merge. Both specialists occupy equivalent positions in equivalent organisations band together, pool their knowledge, and form occupational groups that are increasingly independent from the originating organisations.

Industrial design, which had until that time been a part of “industrial arts” (Ahola 1978), became a field of professional specialization of its own, oriented towards understanding not only material and visual interfaces but also end-users, as well as towards building brands in the Western and global markets. What had earlier been product design now encompassed also “industrial and strategic design” (UIAH 2008).

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN IN THE VIEW OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Larson (1977), it is beneficial for a profession if its ideology coincides with ideological structures that are dominant in society. The benefits of this kind of alignment can be seen very clearly in industrial design. When national research and technology policy aimed at a *national innovation system* in an industry that required a new ideology, new technology, and a new forms of organization, design issues gained vastly wider importance than if the national focus had been on technological development, alone, for example. The new design ideology coincided well with the idea of innovation; of looking at things with a creative mind and finding new solutions. This was also deliberately emphasised. When the notion of a *national system of design* in 1992 was re-launched after a lengthy period deliberation since the 1980s, a *national system of innovation* was cunningly introduced in 1993.

The arguments of the designers thus developed from introducing the idea of designer serving industry (1960s), to convincing industry about the existence of designers (1970s), to ensuring that their way of working was compatible to that of industry (1990s), and then to assure that their input was essential for industrial competitiveness (21st century). Until the 1990s, the designers advocated their importance in their own right and promoted what *they* could do as individual creators. When the design policy was aligned to the national research policy, design was not framed as a value creator as such but as a tool in industry. The focus evolved from was now on how industry and the nation could benefit by using design, rather than on the abilities of individual designers. Society’s needs for markets of service, according to Larson, involves the shaping of the customers’ needs (Larson 1977,

Brennan 1997). With the design policy and its alignment with the existing research policy, the design profession did just that: it influenced actors in industry to make them realise that they needed the designers' services in order to achieve their own goals.

The two most important factors for professionalisation in Finland, the state and the markets, have thus both identified an increased need for industrial design. The design policy has brought together all major players in the Finnish society to make them focus on an area that they had not focused on before: industrial design. Of the public sector and the policy makers, the government has approved the design policy and the ministries actively participated. All the traditional financing institutions in the Finnish science and technology system, the Academy of Finland, Tekes and Sitra, have also participated actively and obediently. In addition to being visible in policy-making and financing, design has been increasingly applied in Finnish private industry and trade. The benefits of industrial design have thus been acknowledged and institutionalized. Using design meaningfully has become a new way of profiling industrial companies *vis-à-vis* their peers, which peers have been intent on doing the same. A Round Table, consisting of participants from industry and from the design field has actively promoted industrial design issues. Companies such as Nokia, Metso Paper and Suunto have increased their investments in design markedly and visibly. As the use of industrial design has now increased and become institutionalized in the leading industrial corporations of Finland, industrial design is now recognized as a more fundamental part of business than before. Industrial design has become a commonplace activity in many industrial companies and, following the model of these companies, the usage of industrial design has spread and has become more sophisticated. No longer is design used only for operative product design purposes; it is used at all levels of company activities. The awareness of the different possibilities of using design has increased, and the ability to utilise or buy the right type of design for a particular problem has also developed in the leading corporations, in particular.

The role of the industrial designer expanded from a product-development oriented practice to include other aspects of business, such as strategy work, understanding consumers, and publicity. Innovation and brand have become key topics for the designers. During the nineties and especially at

the beginning of the new millennium, the term “*strategic design*” has become widespread. The aim of designers has been to move from an operative role towards work of greater strategic importance.

According to research on the professions, to acquire more abstract tasks is one of the most fundamental aspects of creating jurisdiction for a profession. In doing so, the designers have been able to create new and valued areas of expertise, which have institutionalized as parts of the practice and science of industrial design.

CONCLUSIONS

Reflections on the Finnish case of professionalisation of product design appears to generate insights that may be of general interest for anyone studying professionalization, design, or both. The theories that we have reviewed start from different angles; yet their practical implementations are similar in that designers compete with other professions: 1. to span the outermost boundaries of their profession ever outwards 2. to bring barriers to entry ever closer to the most inward core.

In this paper, we have shown how the design field is a semi-autonomous professional field that involves *various* forms of capital: 1. the cultural capital that established designers and professionals possess, 2. the social capital that is connected with the relationships between these designers and marketers, business persons, and managers, and 3. the economic capital that the managers and the economic press tend to emphasize as a key form of symbolic capital.

We have also shown how industrial design as profession shares elements with design as culture and design as academic research. We believe, nonetheless, that industrial design has been most influenced by economic circumstances in which it has evolved into a profession. The industrial designers have deliberately provided spin to the economic aspect as, at the same time, they have aligned their own agenda to that of the national policies and through that aim to ameliorate their own position. Hence, while maintaining its unique character, design in Finland has used very similar means promote professional emergence and institutionalization as have many established professions such as medicine or law in other countries and in Finland also.

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