Mia Cinelli
International Experience Travel Report
The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland
May 3-June 1, 2012
“Hallo” “Hej-hej!” “Hei” 
(Hello in Dutch, Swedish and Finnish.)

I have always been interested in pragmatic solutions, conceptual objects, culture-specific design, and narrative-based interactions. When deciding where I wanted to use my great privilege of international travel, I knew I needed to visit a part of the world where these values were embraced, design was valued, and I could learn how to further tie these elements to my own work. Looking to some of the world’s most successful and innovative designers and design companies, I was instantly drawn to Scandinavia, home of conceptual Droog & Moooi Design (The Netherlands) culturally aware and specific design (Bruno Mattson, IKEA—Sweden) and beautiful, pragmatic solutions (Fiskars, Iittala, Marimekko—Finland). Also, as a native of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (where the great majority is descended from Swedish or Finnish immigrants) I was interested in my own cultural identity and the ways in which it influences my work.

Amsterdam:
To me, arriving in Amsterdam from a sleep-deprived eight-hour flight seemed akin to Dorothy landing in Oz to face a barrage of color, strange architecture, and people of different proportions. (Nick Tobier was, in fact, not joking when he described The Netherlands as ‘a small country of big (tall) people.’). Amsterdam is the cultural hub of The Netherlands, a center of progressive design and rich history. 

Promptly upon arriving by bus to the Leidsplein, the southwestern tip of the city, I visited the Rijksmuseum at 9 a.m., with my luggage in tow. Seeing first-hand Dutch art/design (from the early days of portraits, Delftware, and royal objects to the work of Martin Baas) provided a sense of history that began in valuing design and establishing a very specific “Dutch” style that has remained evident (though still evolving) for hundreds of years. Viewing the enormous ‘The Night Watch’ (Rembrandt) was a near-religious experience; with the overwhelming size combined with a buzz of hushed tourist voices and the onset of extreme jetlag, it almost seemed to glow.
In Amsterdam I visited a number of other museums/exhibitions, including the FOAM Photography Museum (contemporary and experimental photography) and an exhibition of the work of Paul Andriesse (graphic design & sculpture). In addition, I visited the Droog and Moooi showrooms, where I was able to observe and document specifically Dutch product design. A common theme I noticed was the ability of Dutch designers to re-contextualize objects using their previous understanding to create a new meaning. The best example of this was a chandelier “Dear Ingo” by Moooi designer Ron Gilad. By re-contextualizing a slew of ordinary desk lamps together, Gilad created a familiar (yet unfamiliar) object that is both clever, beautiful, and creates a new meaning from a recognized object interaction. Other notable objects included the giant horse lamps (FRONT design), epoxy-coated crocheted lights (Marcel Wanders), durable furniture made from cardboard (Studio Job) and a large delftware-inspired area rug (Wanders), carrying on the tradition of a specifically Dutch aesthetic. The objects at Droog and Moooi were not only progressive in their form and use, but —if I may use this phrase— they were downright fun. From these observations, I can only assume that Dutch designers worry less about making their products ‘right’ or ‘good’, but instead find joy in experimentation, imagination, and re-contextualization, resulting in beautiful, unique, whimsical objects. From my limited (though very valuable) experience within the culture of The Netherlands, I have come to the conclusion much of the whimsy and openness of Dutch design also stems from living in such a tolerant and open society. (Soft drugs and prostitution are both legal and regulated in The Netherlands, and I witnessed both while walking through the Red Light District one evening.)
Droog Design, Amsterdam

Ron Gilad, “Dear Ingo”, Moooi, Amsterdam

Marcel Wanders, Rug & lamp, Moooi, Amsterdam
Gothenburg:
From Amsterdam I flew up to Gothenburg, on the West coast of Sweden. There I met and stayed with my long-time friend and fellow designer, Jesper Jonsson. Jesper spent a year at HDK School of Design & Crafts before becoming an industrial designer at LOTS design. Upon my arrival, Jesper arranged for me to have dinner with and interview a group of his Swedish friends—many from his cohort at HDK—to get their unique take on what it really means to be Swedish designer, and what (if any) are the universal traits of Scandinavian design? The answers I received were varied, but honest. Along with presenting new insights into Scandinavian design, designers Jenny, Erik, Jesper, James & Niclas provided me with information on designers they took inspiration from, along with their personal experiences as Swedish designers.

Niclas Andersson
Designer at Arkitekterna Krook & Tjäder:
"In Sweden, we are very focused on working inside our country. We educate a lot of designers, but there are very few jobs, and all Swedes want to stay in Sweden. It’s very few that pack their bags and leave. They stay because of the Swedish mentality— we pay high taxes, we like our country. Swedish design school does not have international engagements with the rest of the world; if you leave, you have to really push to get yourself out of Sweden to get a new experience. There’s not a lot of discussing design outside of Sweden other than design history. We don’t talk about current design in Germany or Italy or the US... for me, I want to work..."
with furniture, but I have no idea about the furniture business in the US. If you want to travel abroad, it's complicated... we are comfortable here. Swedish designers... actually, we're a scam. Because Swedish design is actually Danish design. We are free-riders. The Swedes are big-winners at design at competitions.... and young Swedes have successfully made Scandinavian 'a bit Swedish', but traditional Scandinavian design is Danish design if you look at furniture. I can't identify specifically SWEDISH design from others. I can only think of one thing... my favorite design is the Glo-Ball that was designed for Flos by Jasper Morrison. It's very boring, but it's very nicely done.”

James Thompson
Owner and designer at Black Badger Advanced Composites

“See... this is the opposite experience I've had. Becoming a Swedish designer, seeing with my 'real Swedish design friends' are going through—the standard of life here is so good, people are proud to be Swedish—but people don't want to leave. It almost feels a bit... unpatriotic? To take your education experience and use it somewhere else. It seems everyone wants to start something in Sweden and getting a movement going, but it's very difficult. Sweden is an export nation with cars, lumber... but not knowledge. In a way, Swedes not leaving is like not letting go of your security blanket and it gets to be difficult because you're dug into where you are. It seems to be quite hard. I think Swedes are trying to preserve their own design culture. They want you to be a 65% successful designer... start a little company. There isn't a lot of incentive about teaching you everything you need to know about international design—so that you'll leave and be a fabulous Scandinavian designer there. As soon as you leave and say "I'm Swedish" they're interested. There are only 9 million of us—we're a tiny country—the world is buying Scandinavian design. What people identify as very specifically "Swedish" design is a lot of Swedish-designed office chairs and furniture from the 1930's and 40's. Things that are museum pieces now. I don't think there are a lot of other countries where people would stop and say 'Oh, that's so Portuguese.' As a North American design student amid these Swedish designers, the Swedish way seems to be—see, in Canada, you start by saying I want to make 'blank'. And you have the end product in mind from the get go. What I see in my Scandinavian friends is a much more central or holistic idea or problem. You might start by asking "What does the person need?" And design outwards from that. So you're not designing with an end project in mind—weather it's a pencil sharpener or a racecar—it doesn't matter. You don't try to make objects the world doesn't need. I see in my friends that there is a much more thought-out way of working instead of sitting and sketching something pretty, because pretty doesn't cut it. It needs to say more and do more, and that's what I see as the essential of Scandinavian design... not just bent birch plywood and these other cliché things. 'It's very boring but it's nicely done' That, Mia, is SWEDISH. My favorite design is the Wassily [Kandinsky] chair by Marcel Bruer, as it was one of the first industrial uses of tubular steel which doesn't sound that sexy, but it's hell on ice... so elegant and reduced.”

Jesper Jonsson
Industrial Designer at LOTS Design

“I don't think I would last long if I packed my bags and went to Paris. Here in design school you establish your network and focus basic knowledge. It's very hard to move to another city. Your professional life is based on who you know. I don't know what my favorite is, but I can get really excited about the concept of a snowboard, or something else that enables transportation that you couldn't do otherwise. Or skiing... going really fast. Or a bicycle.”

Erik Åelby
Designer MA, HDK

“I studied in Vaxjo—it’s the second rainiest town in Sweden—so unless you brought scuba gear, you’re going to
get soaked. Many of the people from there who went to school STAYED there, which is kind of weird. There are lots of furniture companies around, and if they want to they could go to a bigger city, but many people stuck around there... I think that might be because the design business is so insecure in general. The only secure thing you have is the small network you have while you’re studying. I think a lot of people climb onto that because that’s the only safe thing they have. They try to make it work, instead of exploring and trying new stuff. My favorite design is the First Saab designed by Sixten Sason.”

Jenny Jergström
Former Art Director at ADDI

“Swedes are too comfortable and too scared. I’ve talked about moving... but it’s amazing what a bottle of white wind can do on a Friday night. I think Swedish design schools are not encouraging students to move abroad or try their wings. ‘You should be prepared, this is impossible, I’m a teacher and I don’t want to be a teacher, I wish I had a future, but there’s no future!’ I think it’s more like that here than when I was living in the US and the UK—they’re way more encouraging about opportunities. I think when I was in the US and the UK, they [students, faculty] always tried to be like “Ooooh, she’s the Swedish student.” So I was exotic. People would identify my work as so Scandinavian, searching for my Swedish or Scandinavian identity in what I did. Even if Americans did similar things to myself, I thought their work might have looked more Scandinavian than my work. But people I have studied with had a certain expectation of my work to be ‘very Scandinavian.’ It’s so crisp, so Swedish, so simple, your lines, it’s Scandinavian.” It was interesting at the UK university I was at, I felt like I was representing the whole of Scandinavia. Anytime someone made something out of birch they’d say ‘Oh, it’s so Swedish!’ No, that’s just wood just not treated with varnish! They were trying so hard to get this crisp, clean simplicity and it was simply unpolished. I would have to say my favorite designer is Stig Lindberg who designed a lot of [ceramic] table-top stuff.”

Jesper proudly shows off his place of employment, LOTS Design.
Armed with this insight and new information, Jesper (designer at LOTS Design) gave me a historical tour of the city and brought me LOTS Design where we discussed their projects and his role as an industrial designer. He explained to me that instead of working on individual projects they hope to have as a series, they work holistically to develop a system and theme before designing individual objects. His current project involves re-designing the different objects that make up a sterilizing system (akin to an autoclave) for a medical supply company. I also traveled to the nearby suburb of Kortedala to visit Black Badger Advanced Composite Studios, owned by...
James Thompson (HDK, MA 2010), also the principal designer. James designs watchstraps, rings, bracelets, and other custom jewelry out of Corian scraps and samples, establishing a unique, as well as sustainable, design practice. James discussed his design philosophies, stating that ‘truth to material’ was paramount. In his work, he used the material properties of Corian (which is similar to granite) as a similar alternative to materials with similar qualities (Turquoise, Tigers-eye, etc.) creating very durable, beautiful, hand-crafted jewelry. In this manner he re-contextualized the material’s original purpose (sturdy countertops) to create a new meaning based off that of a similar material (precious stones). I was also able to tour HDK School of Design & Crafts, as a part of Gothenburg University. There, Karin Linderoth (MA 2012) showed me the studios, her own work (dealing with urban beekeeping!), and the creative philosophy of the school. Much like University of Michigan’s School of Art & Design, HDK employs cross-disciplinary approach, with a group of designers working alongside cohorts of fine arts and craft disciplines.

I also had the opportunity to visit several museums in Gothenburg. I visited the Museum of World culture, The Rohsska Museum (History of Design) (which chronicled a complete visual history of Scandinavian Design 1850-present day) The Gothenburg Konsthall (Art Museum), the Gothenburg City Museum (a history of the region, city, and Viking origins), and the Gothenburg Maritime museum.
(which provided a unique historical view of industrial design from a maritime-specific pragmatic viewpoint.). To and from museums, I had the great pleasure of visiting multiple small galleries and major design stores, which are as common in Sweden as Starbucks in the US. Most notably was Svensson’s, a huge showroom of modern furniture from the US and Scandinavia.

**Malmo:**
From Gothenburg I traveled south to Malmo, at the Southern tip of Sweden, across from Copenhagen, Denmark. In Malmo, I visited the Malmo Konsthall, where I saw the work of two Swedish artists, Alexander Gutke and Tauba Auerbach. The work of both of these artists especially resonated with me; Gutke made analog films about analog film machines (projectors and cameras), using the projecting device to explore the device itself. (Examples included a film strip that wound around the entire of a room, only for the projector to be projecting a tape measure.) The films were poetic, simple, but beautifully thought out and immaculately crafted. Auerbach’s work consisted of layered, textured white paper, dyed artist’s books (pages of the color spectrum) along with realistic photos of dyed cloth. The simplicity of texture and dynamic use of color was breathtaking. I also visited the Malmo Museet, the Form/Design Center (an exhibition space featuring informative exhibitions and a retail space for local and regional designers) Malmo Hus (The Malmo Castle) contained an art museum, natural history museum, and zoo (to my surprise!)

![Work of Swedish Designers at the Form/Design center](image)
Småland:
From Malmo, I took day trips by train to the region of Sweden called Småland, which is the “Midwest of Sweden”. Almhult is a town in Småland, home to the very first IKEA, as well as an IKEA museum. As a staple of known Swedish design, I decided to visit. The IKEA No. 1 in Almhult was similar to the IKEAS in the United States, but the museum offered a great, historic view into the manufacturing, business, and conceptual underpinnings of IKEA. At the IKEA Museum, exhibits were set up by decade, noting the design changes, material innovations, and trends from the last 60 years. (There was also significant attention paid to the graphic design elements of IKEA, including the evolution of their advertising and graphic identity.)

I also visited Linnaeus University (The alma-matter of Erik, Niclas & Jesper) in Vaxjo, Sweden (also in Småland) where I met with two of their professors: Stephanie Carlekleu (communication design) and Lena Hakanson (textile design) who I interviewed about their students, their facilities and their perspectives on Design. Also like Michigan A&ID, Linnaeus employs a curriculum free of major labels, where students can work fluidly between disciplines.

Lena spoke to me about her work designing interior textiles and toys, working with pattern design—also designing textiles for IKEA (specifically the children’s department.) She too studied at HDK, in Gothenburg. She stated that while she did not identify herself specifi-
ally as a Scandinavian designer, she admitted that her designs “Looked really Swedish.” When asked what she meant, she explained that her work means “—using simple shapes that are easy to understand. Not high-tech. For me that’s typical Scandinavian design.” She also explained: “When I began designing it was in the mid-90s and everything was very simple in Sweden—almost boringly simple. And I went to Finland as an exchange student and there I met an American designer who hated the simplicity. One day he was just shouting—’You start with a simple shape and then you make it even more simple, and that’s because you don’t have talent!’ and unfortunately that was a little true, because we did some painting and worked quite a lot, but we didn’t really work on ideas and we did simple things. Now a days I don’t think this is true.” She explained that this has since changed, as design in Scandinavia “Has become more conceptually aware. The whole society has changed, when I received my design education, it was a shape and nice lines—now it is more considerate of function and sustainability.”

In speaking with Stephanie Carleklev, she discussed the relationship between her nationality and her design values, her design principles, the role of personal experience in her work and the importance of people, emotion, and cross-disciplinary dialogue. (For considerations of space, I have included the full interview at the end of this travel report for those who wish to read it.) This conversation was incredibly important; Stephanie’s immense design knowledge and philosophies were thoughtful and inspiring, and have resonated with me since.

After visiting Linnaeus, I spent the afternoon in Vaxjo visiting their museums, including the Vaxjo Konsthall.

Stockholm:
After leaving Småland and Malmo, I traveled by train up to Stockholm (which, coincidentally, looks an awful lot like Denver, CO.), where I initially explored the architecture, the public art, and the different cultural regions (including Gamla Stan—“old town”) that make up Stockholm. On my first night in Stockholm, I sat next to a stranger on the train, a young woman from Estonia (named Laura

Taking a tour of southern Stockholm with Laura Veisson
Veisson) who, sensing I was a foreigner, invited me with her to her home to tour southern Stockholm. I happily obliged, and we spent the evening walking to a nearby park while discussing our lives, our studies, our families, and the Swedish architecture of the area. Laura explained to me her upbringing in Estonia—formerly the Soviet Union—and it what it was like to grow up in the USSR. Through our experiences (though very different.) we came to the mutual conclusion—both for design and life—that people, no matter where they are, do the best they can with what they have. At the end of the evening she walked me back to the subway, and I made my way home. It was not a planned design experience, nor a tour of a museum, but it was one of the most valuable and candid conversations on humanity and determination that I had during my travels.

While in Stockholm, I visited the Nordiska Museum (a museum of Nordic History and Culture) the Nationalmuseum (The museum of Swedish Art & Design) The Stockholm Moderna Museet, and the Vasa Museum (home of a mint-condition 1600’s ship brought to shore after it sunk on its maiden voyage). I also visited and documented Swedish design solutions at stores such as Design House Stockholm. Many of my experiences in Stockholm were unintentional design experiences; the Subway system has unique stops (sometimes as far as 5 stories underground) built into natural underground caverns, which are then customiged by artists and designers.
Helsinki:
From Stockholm I took an overnight ferry through the Baltic Sea (through tiny islands during Sunset, a visually stunning experience.) and arrived in Helsinki the next morning. I had heard Helsinki described as the “biggest town you’ll ever visit” which is extremely accurate. Though Helsinki is a city of nearly 600,000, it feels more like quaint small town. The people of Helsinki were incredibly helpful, humble, and the architecture of the city (which is mostly of a small scale, though much of it is designed by the Saarinen family; Eero & Eliel, respectively) makes the Helsinki feel as though it significantly tinier than it is. It is also a very safe place, which adds to the feeling of small-town security. While the residents of Helsinki appeared similar to those of Stockholm, Malmo and Gothenburg, the architecture did not. Due to Finland’s previous rule by Russia (1809-1917) the architecture looks distinctively soviet, and traces of the past (hammer and sickle sculpture, Russian orthodox churches) are still evident today.

This year (2012) Helsinki was named World Design Capital, and therefore businesses, galleries, and events were taking part as a part of their year-long title. As a part of World Design Capital, I went to conference hosted
An hour or so from the City was Fiskars, Finland, the original site of manufacturing Fiskars products. Fiskars is a staple Finnish company, and one of the oldest in the world, dating back to 1649. Fiskars is home to the Fiskars Village, a quaint town which employs artists (via a residency program) to create work to sell in the village. There is also a Fiskars museum, documenting the growth and changes as Fiskars as a design and manufacturing company over the last 350 years. There I was able to see and document these changes, as well as observing the work being produced there today.

In Helsinki I also visited several Museums, including the Helsinki Design Museum, and the Amos Anderson Art Museum, which was a small museum built into a very old, converted home. There I was enthralled by a specific piece of Finnish sculpture by Eino Ruutsalo called ‘Multikosmos’. It sat very nonchalantly in the corner of a back room, and I was immediately intrigued by a whirring noise as I entered. ‘Multikosmos’ takes the form of a large black cabinet with lights moving as such that they create shooting star patterns through deliberately cut holes in the cabinet itself. The sensation that light created was remarkably like an active night sky, and I admit I spent a good 40 minutes staring at this object, completely entranced. I was mystified, excited, overwhelmed, hopeful and nostalgic. Was it sculpture? Was it art? Was it a designed object? I was unconcerned. It was magical. Because it is difficult to show in still photos, I have attached a video.
During my last few days in Helsinki I installed a site-specific fence installation, similar to those I had been doing in Ann Arbor this past spring. I chose a very well-traveled location called Kaisaniemi Park, a large park (almost the ‘Central Park’ of Helsinki) near a bus and tram hub. I chose a fence at the end of a football pitch, between a school, playground and botanical garden. Having carefully considered the phrase during the duration of my trip, I decided on the phrase “Someday I will ignore my doubts.” Using flagging tape I had brought with me from the US, I mapped the text out and began weaving. After two days of installing, the phrase was complete. Upon finishing, the school kiddy-corner to the installation released its children for recess, and a bombardment of excited first-graders ran to the fence in wonder. I photographed the fence, left my moniker (Lambchop) e-mail address, and left the city the next morning.
When I returned to the United States, I Googled the phrase “Someday I will ignore my doubts” with no search results retrieved. Convinced it had been taken down, I neglected to google the phrase for several weeks. To my surprise, when I re-searched for the phrase in the middle of June, the internet (blogs, twitter, facebook, reddit, instagram, flickr, street-art sites, discussion forums etc.) was buzzing with images, hypotheses, thank-you notes and reflections on the piece. Individuals were even making their own art and photography pieces based off of the work. Many simply sent thanks to the ‘anonymous artist’ for providing inspiration or a word of encouragement to them. I was thrilled to have had some positive impact on some of the residents of Helsinki. As of August 4, 2012, it was still installed in Kaisaniemi Park. Through my e-mail address on the fence, I was contacted by a design group in Helsinki working on a renovation project of a large historical space (http://www.teurastamo.com/en/teurastamo.html) to design a fence-piece for their food/community center, The Abattoir. I am currently working with them on finalizing the design.

Via raffleofyegods.wordpress.com: “In a nearby park in Helsinki someone has made a big statement – with coloured plastic tape! All of the letters are done so that plastic tape has been winded to the grid of the fence. Quite cool! It must have been a quite a job to do. I have no idea whose behind this, tell me if you know! It is located wisely since there is a lot of hectic people walking trough this park every morning and afternoon – many people will see the message and maybe even think it a bit.

I think it’s a thoughtful sentence. Or at least it made me think – what are my doubts? What are my doubts concerning other people and what are my doubts concerning myself? And what should I do to ignore them if they are just unnecessary bias...”
Since coming back to the United States, I have been looking more critically at my own design practice, determined to be more experimental, whimsical, hopeful. I am altering my design process to focus more on valuing people (their needs, opinions, and emotions) and am investigating/considering the way my culture (that of an American, a Yooper, a Michigan-resident, the daughter of an Italian Immigrant, an upper-Mid-Westerner) influences my design methodologies and principles.

My time spent in Scandinavia was incredible. I learned an unbelievable amount about the current state of design, as well as discovering a lot about myself. I feel as though I have been truly changed for the better by this experience, and I am certain it is influencing (and will continue to influence) my work for the rest of my life. I am deeply thankful to the School of Art & Design for making this experience possible. With great respect and sincere gratitude, I thank you.
“Dank u!” “Tack!” “Kiitos!”
Interview With Stephanie Carleklev
Lecturer at Linneaus University,
School of Design

May 16, 2012

How would you classify yourself as a designer?

That classification is the problem. I’m trained here in Vaxjo. I think I would always say I have a background in graphic design, but I would rather use the word visual communication. But then if you try to incorporate sustainability what do you do as a graphic designer? Do you just choose soy inks or environmentally friendly printing methods? Then it becomes a little bit lame and you have to find a different definition. So when I think about the students here we don’t train them as product or graphic designers. We could, but they’d have to spend the whole three years focusing on a very specific discipline. We train them in talking to people. Considering people. Considering the context, the environment something needs to work, and that is — to answer your question, I like to see myself as a designer. And then to talk rather about my qualities that I of course can deliver: well done layouts, well done visual communications—but I can always think a step further. I can think about communications that also includes sound, or tactile sensations. Before I do the brochure or layout, I can investigate what would be a good way to communicate, and sometimes I decide not to do a brochure—I decide to do something different. I think while you’re in school things are kind of clear—you do your projects and everybody understands you and you leave school and people say who are you? And you say ‘designer’ and they have a hard time putting you in one of your categories. It’s easier if you say ‘yes, I’m a product designer I’m a textile designer.’ People directly know what you’re talking about. And right now there is a confusion of definitions in design. And design is evolving a lot— we need words to describe what people do and we can’t stick to this traditional verbiage—but that is another conversation.

What does it mean to be a designer of your specific nationality? [German]

I’m not trained in Germany at all. I trained in Sweden and live in Sweden and I’ve lived in Sweden for 10 or 11 years by now. My problem in Germany was I could not get a design education there. I think I have maybe more than other students here in Sweden followed design on amore international level, or with a more international approach. Because I am German, I also look more at what is happening in Germany. And if we take Europe there are a lot of interesting things happening in England—especially when you are trying to find ‘what kind of designer am I?’ because it’s wrong to say I’m a graphic designer. What unfortunately can happen (and I realize that sounds like a lot of prejudice) but I think Sweden has a long tradition of craft. There are very skilled textile workers and ceramic workers and that’s the reason why those old design schools were founded as craft schools. Sometimes it seems like this is something you shouldn’t touch here. It’s a heritage people are very proud of. And suddenly design becomes so much connected to craft. So what we are doing here is very Scandinavian, in another way it is a little different because we leave craft and sometimes this heritage – what Sweden is very proud of—it can be a hinder, a barrier someway making it sound like ‘why don’t you teach students textile skills or graphics skills or ceramic skills?’ Culture is significant for me, but more so that I look around and I try to pick everywhere I find
something interesting. But, then I think—there are certain values in Sweden. People are an important value. You can find this in IKEA, you can find this in many design projects done in Sweden. But I think when IKEA went out to other countries, like having children in the living room (I listened to a lecture about IKEA that was bizarre, in France) children had nothing to do in the living room. They were supposed to be in the children’s room. But I think Sweden is very liberal. [In Sweden] It’s about the whole family. Children are highly valued, and it’s also men and women are equal. It’s not perfect—don’t give that illusion, but design always had had a practical side; it has to function in life. So in this way it’s very different from Italian design, which is very baroque. This is something I sign under without being Swedish; these are values I find very important. When you look into sustainability. My journey—and I hope this is helpful for your project—because I can talk a little bit about when I started to work with sustainability in 1995. That’s the reason I’ve been to America. I was in Arizona working for an Italian architect who had been a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, and he had developed an architecture project where he wanted to combine ecology and architecture called Arcosanti. He was very popular in the 70’s, but it had become this crazy hippie thing. So in ’95 people weren’t talking too much about sustainability. I knew I didn’t want to be an architect. I wanted to be a designer and I wanted to work smaller. After all these years—more than 15 years have gone—I have looked a lot of failure. Why are people called hippies and crazy people, and what is the problem with eco design and green design? One Swedish professor named Matilda Tham who works in London at Goldsmith University—she’s exploring a lot on how sustainability should feel. The key is human needs. Not needs in terms of food, but more in terms of expressing yourself. Laughing and enjoying. So sustainability is not like a subject where you can teach students certain rules. It’s really based on empathy and talking to people and understanding people. But I feel as though this way of thinking is very—I am home here in Sweden. It’s not just Sweden that can do that. And unfortunately Germany—there are things that are done a little better—the engineering. I would love if you could meet one of our professors here—he is into wood architecture and building large structures out of wood. You think of wood and little wooden house—he is very fascinated by German Engineers. They find technical solutions and that Sweden may not be also good at. I think this is because Germany is large. I think it has to do with little countries like The Netherlands or Sweden. In little countries you care about people. In big countries it doesn’t matter if we have ten thousand more or less. What kind of difference does it make? You can take Switzerland as well. Those little countries have a different way of thinking about people. I think they’re a little bit nicer.

Tell me about your work.

I have done film, illustrations (murals), but what I feel the most comfortable with is interactive sculptures. I work a lot with my husband who is great at the technical part of interactive sculpture. If you do interactive design you can work with people it becomes very interesting. I do write a little bit and I’d like to intensify that. Of course it is a certain struggle I don’t want to work in advertisement. I don’t feel comfortable if someone says ‘do a layout here and give it to me tomorrow.’ I like projects where you can influence which way the project is going. We’ve done a few very interactive projects with lights. My master’s degree was about
sound as illustration. So I am still sticking to this communication part, which I find very interesting, but I don't think we have to be limited to visual. This project involved exploring a certain object and why visual appeal to all senses, but it's interesting to look at other ways of communicating like taking sound for example. Projects like that I love. They are very exciting.

**What would you say is your core design philosophy?**

People. Everything I do, I want to be able to relate it to people. That's what I think is the problem where it's just like 'Do this. Here's the text and the picture and do some layout' I think that can be missing the point. And I like to think outside of the box. A graphic designer does not always need to think 'I am a graphic designer so I need to deliver a brochure or a folder or something.' Why not think event or happening? Why not put someone in a costume and go out? Why not do things like that? So yes, people. People are important. And emotions. I think this is a struggle that every student is fighting. When you talk about sustainability many people are involved. You listen to many other people and it gets very difficult to—you have to be very mature to work as an artist also. People cannot tell you everything. They will give you lots of good hints and comments, but as a designer you still are an artist and you have to come up with something charming, beautiful, interesting. In this case emotion is very important, that you are able to convey an emotion, or get someone going—move someone, touch someone in some way.

**How much of your design work is based off of your personal experiences?**

It is always important. For example... I loved books all my life. They are a very important part and I decided early I wanted to be a graphic designer because I wanted to be the person who designs the books. But then during my journey I was very moved by sustainability—all those people I met in Arizona—I thought yes! They have the right language; it's not just books I want to DO something for people. When I worked for the Italian architect in Arizona, I felt like his architecture was enabling people to have feelings and dialogues to come together. And it relates to books. And so I continued my studies and I felt it like a spiral that goes upwards. I ended up in the same spot where I stated just many stories above. I think that all my projects somehow relate to an interest. Communicating—inspiring people, moving people. It's always there in a certain way. And when I teach students—and also for myself—you have to have your personal preferences. You always think about wanting to be special — everyone does—but you want to find your language. You want to have a design language that everyone says 'ah, this is her!' You don't find that. It is something inside of you and you have to very aware of what you like and who you are and it happens automatically that you develop this signature or red thread that goes through your work. I encourage personality. Becoming an artist is part technique, but it's also about finding yourself and being comfortable with your strengths and weakness and feeling confidence in doing what you enjoy and like.

**What do you teach? And do you have any teaching advice?**

I have taught second, first and second year in our master's program. I refer a lot to who I have been as a student and what I liked about my own teaches. Something about tutoring is I like to spend time with
the students, and to listen. I think if we take
the undergraduates it makes a huge differ-
ence. An undergraduate needs to learn to be
confident. They are worried about making
mistakes and I help them with their proj-
ects. Some people get so nervous and so
afraid. As a teacher I focus on making them
feel confident and not to get so hysterical.
They need to learn to trust themselves and
understand their strengths and weakness.
This is important when they apply for jobs,
so they can put words to what they can
do and what they are good at. That’s how
I treat the undergraduates. The graduates
need to be self-motivated and I have a hard
time if I get graduate students if they don’t
know why they are doing what they’re
doing—but then tutoring and talking to a
student, starting where they are and give-
ing them individual advice. A lot cannot be
done in a class. You can lecture, but every
student needs individual advice on how to
move on. They all have different starting
points and abilities. A nice thing in Sweden
is that if you start working at a university,
you get part of your working time to go to
teaching workshops and that helps a lot.
I think if you’re a design teacher you are
stuck between being a professional and a
teacher. Students here want to have profes-
sionals who have done a lot out there in
reality, and sometimes you feel as though
as long as I can talk about reality that’s
enough, but that’s not true. You have to take
them by the hand, and it’s about what you
can teach them and help them understand
in the process.

What advice would you give to yourself as
a young designer?

Trust yourself. Accept yourself the way you
are. Be honest about your strengths and
weaknesses. Follow your heart. Care about
something. Continue to care about some-
thing. Everything is a development. One
might think you do school and in school
you develop and then you’re done, but in
reality it’s a process. And you will have to
go through 24 and 28 and every time you
will learn something new. You worry when
you leave, because you know what kind of
company you want to work with, but how
many companies are there like IDEO [pro-
gressive, multi-disciplinary design firms]? One of my criticisms of Sweden is that I
can give you one comparable company
—Ergonomidesign—but that’s it. So you
feel a little bit like “Hmm. We are teaching
hundreds of students with this attitude, and
when they come out we have like Volvo,
who says ‘can you draw a car? And if you
have good ideas and that’s nice, but we do
cars.” I started my own company and then I
began teaching a little bit which was sup-
posed to be maximum 50%, but now I’m
here and it’s 100%. If you are interested – do
you know the book “Design for Sustainable
Change”? I’m a bit hesitant to suggest it to a
graduate student in fear it may be too easy.
It was published in 2011 and it summarizes
a lot of information on Sustainable design,
it features a lot of companies and design
projects, and that’s why I like it. It’s a very
interesting book I’ve been happy finding.
Design has developed a lot. It has gotten—
you can do a PhD in design theory, design
philosophy—but we are in a process, and
we have a hard time on putting words with
what we can do. In Europe – in England
with the design council—it promotes design
and innovation and it was for companies.
They worked on transitional design. If you’re
curious, you should look into it. We’re [de-
signers are] still fighting with words. I think
multidisciplinary is the way to go. If you’re
a craftsperson then the one-person designer
works. But in the field we want to work
it’s more like a team. Ideally, it’s not just
designers.