MDE 504—theory room

Friday September 11th 2020

If I don't always follow the chronology of occasions offered by this course, it is because I want to start with psychology of the tasks. In return I'll give you a road-map now and at the end, where everything is neatly tied up on a time-line. Let me start now by saying two words about myself, which I didn't last time.

First there is the context of *where I come from*. I lived abroad as a child and youth, owing to my parents life as diplomats. When home we stayed with my grandparents. My grandfather was the first to produce and launch a soft drink called *Solo*. Which I am sure many of you are likely to know about.

My maternal grandmother—that you see with a cigar on my context-wall—is of Sephardic Jewish background, though *Norwegian* through generations (like many Norwegians). My grandfather came from a wealthy family of geologists, botanists and entrepreneurs. We spent our summers with them at Tjøme.

My grandfather's love of nature, and their shared experiences from the resistance and hiding in a foresty area during WWII, made them able in *hunting* and *foraging* throughout their live. I got to know about various natural resorts in Southern Norway through what ended up on the dinner table at Tjøme, after being stored in a cold room at the factory.

So, this is the Norwegian context. Abroad, I graduated from *high school* at Lycée Janson de Sailly in Paris. That's when I left home after having spent my early years in France at several occasions, Switzerland, Belgium and 3 years in the USA. After I left home, my parents continued moving about for several years.

I myself continued to move about as I finally decided that I was going to become an anthropologist, following in the footsteps of parents in regard of living my life with mobility as my basic condition and ground premise. Owing to some dramatic events I went to study *semiotics* in Bologna (Italy) with Eco.

You are perhaps too young to remember the novel, but some of you may have seen the movie or the series: the Mediaeval drama called the *Name of the Rose*. Umberto Eco, my professor in Bologna, wrote that book. While in Italy, I read several other books by him, including the novel Foucault's pendulum.

I think I actually managed to crack my way to the sources of *his crazy sense of pattern*, only to realise that this was his way of playing with

people. People would write thick books about his secret codes and he would *laugh* of them. Nevertheless, my interest in how facts dictate the story—where it goes—is from that time.

I think that my interest in deeper aspects of design come from there. Our interest in facts, or the way things are, does not *limit* itself to the way things are, but *where they are moving*, and to shape our lives according to what we see as a *good life*. That is, the ancient definition of ethics: *what is a good life?*

We are asking *that* question all the time, and coming up with different answers. I have been interested in how people ask and pursue this question *when conditions are really hard*. As when I did my fieldwork on humanitarian aid in a war-zone: the city of Sarajevo in the mid-90s. How do people shape *humanity*?

At this time I was working with my name sake Fredrick Barth—a professor in anthropology—who shared my interest in how people plan and how events turn to action. I owe some enduring interests to our relationship. For instance, what he called 'disordered systems'. A term he borrowed from *structural geology*.

It really is about how designs can grow under conditions of cross-pressure, where they are *gardened* rather than engineered. How we are makers at our own risk and peril, moved by the pressures of the world around us, *as well as* our own internal pressure. From this cross-pressure *surprising forms* emerge.

In its cultural aspects, social life is creative. Being together here, in this class, we will create something, as individuals and as a group. Fredrik Barth—who was my thesis director—did his fieldwork in what one might call the *expanded* Middle East, his first being in the North Western Territories of Pakistan.

In the early beginning of my relationship with him, my parents' lives took a dramatic turn with their residence in Iraq (1981-1982), during the Iran-Iraq war. Among the *memorabilia* that I have from my parents at this time is a watch —a Patek Philippe—which was a gift to my father from Saddam Hussain.

He received it with a gift-card, a signed photograph in a silver frame and a photograph from their meeting in the following days. It was an awkward situation: chatting with a person with a *loaded* gun, who had my father's name misspelled and who actually wasn't Saddam but one of his doubles. *How to deal with it?*

He never wore the watch, and when my father passed I found the memorabilia I am showing here, stored in his *garage*. He wouldn't keep

them in his house, but wouldn't throw them away either. I think that I have kept them because they prove a point: *that images do not mirror reality, but rather break our mirrors.*

What do I mean by this? We have spent years using *digital* technology to *mirror* reality. It is a little bit like the early years of the synthesiser —the musical instrument—when we tried to make it sound like something we *already* knew: a trumpet, a saxophone, a drum-set. I would like to invite you to do the opposite.

That is, to follow track of how the physical arrangement of electronic equipment— assembled into a system (SWIRL)—in the space of the class-room, could determine how the virtual class-room works: not only to those who are connected through the video-conferencing system Zoom, but also *here*.

Here, in the classroom where we are upstage, while the those who are Zoom-connected interact with us from backstage: they can send each other messages, for instance, which we can't. How does the placing of the elements determine how this compound theatre devoted to learning actually works?

I have broken down the elements of the standard conferencing system of this room, into visual elements that are not locked to the room but are movable. In other words, they reveal themselves as a special class of furniture. The French word 'meuble' comes from that it is movable. Movable property.

Immobilier means non-movable property: the facility that we are in, as an estate. So, the movable property of furniture—here, sound-monitor, a microphone, a sound-card, an iPAD and a goose-neck—is the experimental resource we have in our class-rooms: contingent on the length of available cables.

This will both determine what we hear and see —whether we are in this room, or remote-connected—and the outcomes. What we can achieve together. So, we have not closed ourselves in. But experiment with distance between people, and the distribution of equipment in space. It is a specific problem.

And, in course, of the term it will become more precise: both in terms of alternative options to construct our learning space—our theatre—and how we stand in it, experience it, and the works that are going to hatch in this space. The SWIRL system does not solve any given problem, but *programmes for solutions*.

Now to our course. It will develop in the edge-land that currently defines our lives: *between* the risks of viral contamination, and the risks of digital connection. Here we will develop an

experimental life form called MDE 504 | Theory 1—Theory in design-practice. It is a space for developing a theoretical repertoire in practice.

The subtitle of this first theory-course, Theory 1, is indeed *theory **in** design practice*. Which means that what we seek to achieve is to develop theory *immersively*: that is, from within practice and *not* from the outside of design. We are not over and above design practice. We are in it! We work in it!

It means that in this course you will start determine your *own* way of developing theoretical understandings, from *practice*: *experimental* practice, first and foremost. This process will be supported by a class-situation and a structure. Both of these I propose to gather under a *research question*.

Since our class is operating *from* and *in* a Corona-situation, I found that it could be interesting for us to work with *freedom*, as research topic. Not only to query what it means to design *for* freedom, under the current circumstances, but to look for more direct links between *design* and *freedom*.

By this, I mean that freedom may somehow *depend* on design. I will return to this. But let me start by elaborating a bit on the situation. Since the class was estimated to exceed 20 class-members, at the time when I was programming the course, I had to find a way teach the class *divided* in *two*.

One way is to teach twice in the same day. But his means that the two halves would develop different course-experiences and cease to operate as a class. It also doubles the work-load for me. So, I decided—after today's kickoff—to divide the class in two in a different way: using Zoom as an intermedium.

That is, one half coming to the *class-room*, the other participating on *Zoom*. And the swapping who's coming to class, and who's meeting on Zoom *every next* Friday. Because, gentlepeople, we are meeting *every* Friday, with a 2 week break at the so-called *corridor* weeks (named after an excel sheet).

So, here we go: *instead* of asking what Zoom is, I want to ask what Zoom *does*. This is also my humble but definite advice to you, when you develop your reflection at a theoretical level, is *not* to ask (for instance) what design is, but what design does. So, Zoom is designed in a certain way and *does* things.

But if we see Zoom as part of the bigger picture—not blinded by the state of *exception* that Corona imposes on us—Zoom is also part of a design that says: as computers are

becoming more powerful, they will be taking on bigger jobs. Such as managing *social interaction* under *pandemic* conditions.

But computers do not do jobs in a mechanical way: computers order a growing spectrum of complex operations, but they also have their own characteristic way of creating a mess. So, I ask—is the computer-mess going to grow as the jobs become bigger? Will we spend *less/more* time on trouble-shooting?

This year, in this class, computer-assistance is in demand, for the simple reason that we have to resort to computer-assistance to make the class work under Corona/Covid19 conditions. We also have to facilitate the use of the class-room so that we can move around, taking care of each other, *without* becoming stressed.

The way that I am prompting this base-line of co-work in the class is by attaching dots every 2m on the floor. Which means that people will have to find their 1m distance to each other, without being told, and the dots working as guides rather than as instructions; like saying "move to a dot—this will be your dot".

But we say—No! You will have to determine your space, and accommodate the *safety perimeter*, or *social distance*, by finding your way *relationally*. And, yes you will be guided: so this is required by the situation, but it is also a good metaphor of the course. This is [Edward T. Hall](#)'s [Hidden Dimension](#) applied.

In a regular *year* we would read this as *theory*, and usually it interesting to interior and furniture people primarily. *But this year this book is not theory anymore*. It is something that we have to keep in mind, and is of practical interest, all the time. Why? Because we have to find a way of *containing* it.

That is, keeping it in/with our bodies when we are together in physical space. The same is true of Zoom: under normal circumstances we *wouldn't* even dream of using video-conferencing tools. But now in this class we will not only be using it, we will also *contain* it. Since teaching is taking place in space.

And as is I have found it difficult to contain Zoom: when the entire class is broadcasted on video-conference it kind of works, but it is also extremely extenuating and energy-demanding in the long run. When people gather in a room, and only some are on Zoom, I realise that there is little to *contain* Zoom.

It falls out, in a way; and becomes lost in a haze, so to speak, or in cyberspace. It is as though people on the other side, who are connected by Zoom, feel that way too. Since

they tend to hold back on participating, or saying anything. Why is Zoom so *different* in the two situations, and what does it do to us?

I have noticed that when it works—that is, when *all* are on Zoom—people *edit* more carefully what they say, and the visual material is also more *crisp*. Because the connection is poor, people have to be more *articulate*: so, why not? Well some of the substance can get lost if there is a false sense of clarity.

And it also can be difficult to tell *how the person you are linked up with is doing* (both practically and emotionally). In time, we can develop a kind of *megaphone* language: which is not only loud and clear, but also can become slogan-like or like a sales/pitch. And we end up asking: what is s/he *really* saying?

So, that's what I mean by the danger of loosing substance. After a while, we will start asking: where's the beef? And visually, the standard resolution of the conferencing camera—on Zoom—is much *lesser* than the resources on our own machines, or when we are present in space, and interact.

Under such circumstances it is very easy to start *mirroring* people and their contributions, because the poor visual quality has that kind of "flatlining" effect. I've tried to find ways around this problems, at a 'prison-break level' that doesn't really deserve to be called *research*. But rather trouble-shooting.

The interesting thing is that if you manage to trouble-shoot something, and fix it so that it works, you are suddenly in a *new place*. It's like when someone offers you the flower bouquet that you see, while explaining that it is also edible. *This actually happened to me a couple of days back*. So, what do you do?

Do you keep it, or eat it! There's an phrase in English that expresses that idea: *to have the cake and eat it too*. That's *impossible*, right? But you *have to* open for that possibility *too*, because you don't know the consequences of your acts, and you don't know *what the future* will bring. So, you have to be perceptive!

The SWIRL symbol, on the middle of the table, is a kind of 'have the cake and eat it too' sign. *Like a dog chasing its own tail*. What it says is: whatever is happening in this space—what we see, hear and move—is picked up by this equipment we have, and fed back to us *shifting* our ideas of *what we can do* in this space.

When this happens we are in what I call the *learning theatre.* When we have problems otherwise are wicked—that is, becoming worse as we try to solve them—it is a

liberating moment when we can start working with them. It is as though a big weight is lifted off our shoulders. Our hands and feet untied.

Let me explain. In this class, I will ask you to keep a log that we call a *Black Book*. The content and format of this book will be of your own invention. *Wicked*! But there is a *specific* task attached to it. Which is to look through drawings and notes from your week and select a couple (say, 3) that you garden a bit.

The point being that this material that you have in your keep is *not* useful for you now, and you will not use in projects in or outside school, in a foreseeable future. But still there is something there. You may not be sure what it is. But please do not attempt to solve it completely. Just enough to make it *readable*.

This is the kind of material that it is interesting to spend some time with, and look at later on. What was I thinking? Now we're like 6 months in the future. Will you think it was *naive*? Or, perhaps it has a *freshness* from the early days in your MA, that you have somehow lost a bit later on? Who knows? I wouldn't…

So, the Black Book (BB) is like your cookbook in the dark *arts*. It is a place that you keep and *cultivate* materials with an unknown *future* potential. The point being to make it interesting enough for you to return to it, and that you like it. Maybe I would use a stronger word: the best thing is if you *love* your BB.

We will put this into perspective with a more systematic approach towards the end of the course, when I will give you a lecture on Swiss designer Karl Gerstner's book *Designing programs* (1964) with the subtitle: instead of solving problems programming for solutions. Sometimes ideas come from books.

Which is why I will ask of you—starting from next time—that you do *book presentations*. These books are not from me, but ones *you find* in the library as part of your *research*. Things that you find potential and interesting like in the BBs. But the gardening principles are a bit different than with the BB.

I would like you to share the story of how you got to the book you pick for you presentation: what drew you to it? Did you find it, or did it find you? At the library at KHiO or somewhere else? What does it feel like having in you hands, as a physical object? What is the cover like? Hard cover? End-paper? Glued/stitched?

And so on—what makes your relate to the book as an *object*. Do you think it is a *consistent* object? Try relating to the book as a *designer* (even if you are not a graphic designer—you still can develop professional sensitivities to book-objects). Being specialised you can handle any kind of object.

The point of proceeding in this way, is for the book to become stable as something you handle and look through. How is it structured? What do the spreads look like? Are there anyone in particular that are appealing to you? Why is it appealing? *Looks through the text and see if there is one catching your attention!*

This is important, because I want you to sample that passage. Read it out loud. Taste it for yourself, then in class. What does it do? How does it work for you at this moment, in this place? In this way you are present to the text but on *your own* terms. Then, close the book and put it back. What do you take on?

Or, what do you take with you when you close the back-cover, as you close a door? Try to solve this in such a way that it takes you not more than 10' in class. We usually have 3 presentations, from 3 different people, *each* Friday. Which means that by the end of the course everyone will have shared their book.

This is how we structure each Friday: in the first hour (09:00-10:00) we do the book presentations. Then, after that we *alternate* between lectures that I will be giving, and plenary discussions. *One* Friday we have a lecture, *next* Friday we have a discussion, and we alternate like this till we're done.

The discussions are prepared: one function is to develop a climate for discussions in class, the other function is not to be overly pedagogic when you turn your mind around things you want to discuss. The things you want to discuss do not have to be broad and shared, they can be quite *nerdy* and *techie*.

In the fact, the more *specialised* your preparations are, the more likely is that we can extract really interesting things out of them, when we process them in class. Perhaps, sometimes, we won't understand a thing. But that is not negative when what we're aiming at is to *develop* understandings.

It's like with books: you don't read them to understand something, but to bring out something. With our approach you don't even read the whole thing: you consult a book, consult with it, develop a relational approach, intimacy, and the idea that you can return to it. It's like that with *facts* and *special* knowledge.

They can be interesting without being straightforward. I am *not* teaching you to be confused, but to *let time work* for you. The work of time is probably the most important thing to learn in research, when the aim is to develop

reflection at a theoretical level. If not personal and experience-based, what's the use?

If you make a map one would expect you to know the territory. On the other hand, you don't make a map in one day. The steps that I use in situations like these are: first I make an *attempt*, after that I *try again*, then I *do something else*, because when I *return* I learned something, then I *unlearn…*

Why unlearn? *Sometimes* people are puzzled when I say this. Unlearn. Why unlearn? For me it is a way of asking myself—what do I do now? What comes next? Where do I take it from here? I have do make some *decisions*. The only way to *learn* from decisions is to *make* decisions. It's a bit brutal.

So, this is unlearn. Then the final and 6th step I call *crossover*. What I mean by that is that we need to contain what we have learned, and the decisions we have made, and bring them onwards to a different field. You have learned to handle books, for instance, but what then? Do you need to reflect in a different media?

This is something that you will try out in the second half of the course. You approach someone—for instance, and MA2 student— you *interview* that person (I will teach you how) but then you do not make a written interview that you hand over to me. What you do is to make a comment in a chosen media.

That is, you make a comment of the interview —what you learned from it and your impressions of the interviewee as a colleague and a professional—and you make a comment of it in a media of your own choice. A comment picks up on what has been shared and said, but with a *twist*, which is your own.

The reason why we do this is because designers are good at assimilating other people's knowledge, and making point about it. The reason that we do this in theory-class is to make another important statement: our reflection is *not* locked to writing, what we take out from theory is not *locked* to writing.

You will write something, but next term. This term you will develop your reflective repertoire through *media*/materials of *your own* choice, presenting and discussing in class, from feedback that you get from me. This term, I will do a chunk of writing. You, next term. So your turn with come, don't worry.

You will produce something like this book, which contains essays by the current MA2, who did them in the Spring. Take the book, handle it, feel it, read what interests you. Keep it with you till at least next term. In this class you will do stuff that some of you may think that they cannot. Just wait and see.

My written feedback to you is individual and collective. The *individual feedback* is on the BBs at the end of the term. The collective feedback and feedforward comes from me in the form of flyers—A5 leaflets—that I write and post on Canvas every week. You get two of these to read. Which is not over the top.

The flyers are of two kinds, beginning with the *thematic*—raising the subject of the week— following with synoptic flyers each Friday with a lowdown of the contents and what happen-ed, monitored by me. Your point of view is something you will have to develop by note-taking and processing in your afternoons.

So, the whole Friday you are with the course: the first part of the day 09:00-12:00 with me, and then your work independently in the Friday afternoon 13:00-16:00. Spend this time well, since you do have some tasks, as should be clear by now, but none of them are difficult. What they require is regular work.

You have to think and plan, so that **1)** your work in the theory class does not take time from your other courses: **2)** you don't have to catch up towards the end. That is pure hell. And I really don't recommend it. So, please work regularly in the Friday afternoons after your class with me. On a friendly note.

So, the structure is like this: **I)** 09:00-10:00 *book presentations* [see lists]; **II)** 10:00-11:00 *lectures & class discussions;* **III)** 11:00-12:00 *workshop in groups by specialisation*, discussing views and ideas for the BBs. Then you have a flying start in the afternoon. *BB*, *book-presentation* and *design comment*.

That's it, really. When we have group-discussions I will ask one of you to act as chair—or, conveyor—so that it is not me talking all the time. I always ask people not to use their mobiles in class. Bring a regular note-pad. This year it is even more important: mobiles interfere with the class-equipment.

We don't smoke in class, no drugs or weap-ons (eh!). Concentration, awareness, respect. An active forum for reflective self-development guided by the principle that—in the end—the outcome should be an embodied reflective repertoire. Most of the students that I've had find their own way.

Then, what do we have for support? We have 4 books that I will lecture on. We start with Norman Potter's book *Models and Constructs —Margin Notes for a Design Culture* (1991). This is a kind of Black Book made by a

designer after a long life of projects and teaching. A wise book by a *joiner*.

At the other end of the course we have another reflective designer, Karl Gerstner with the book that I already mentioned: Designing programmes. Then, in between we have a book by Sarah Davies (2017) on *Hacker Spaces—The making of the maker movement*. And then Jaron Lanier's *You are not a Gadget*.

The last book is 10 years old, but still relevant. In some sense, both Sarah Davies' and Jaron Lanier's books are about people who teach themselves, and learn from each other. Not unlike the learning conditions that prevail on the MA at KHiO, based on an ideal of hard work and generosity, honing the critical mind.

I prepared a road-map for you so that you don't loose your way. And if you do you ask me. Be weary of reading the materials you get from me—including e-mails—carefully. A lot of confusion tends to come out of asking each other. And there is always a lot of confusion. Not all of it is necessary.

So, *ad fontes* as one says in Latin, meaning: go to the sources. First hand information wherever life takes you. The MA is an experience that you are living in the first person. Or, at least, you need to have that established. You are investing in your MA. Society is investing in your MA.

You are expected to participate actively in class. If you are feel that you are becoming ill, but are not sick, you follow the class on Zoom. If you need to do something else on a Friday with me, you discuss this with me ahead of time: at least, two weeks. We usually find tasks that you bring with you.

The relationship with me is *contractual*: it means that if you put in the work, then we can *exceptionally* make deals. Of course, it cannot be the rule. Your pass/fail of the course is contingent on two deliveries—the BB and the design comment—and your active participation in classes. That's it!

You will find me approachable on most topics. Both relating to class contents and process, and with regard to questions of gender, ethnicity, generational issues etc. What happens is that we try to do something with it. Two woman in MA2, came up with a book-list by woman in graphic design. It is circulating.

And I will circulate it to you if you are interested. I am saying this, because in the course of one year, your research is part of what could determine the *future* of design: where it comes from, who's done it, how we

work and teach. Everything is a matter of discussion and action, when *professional*.

So, back to the research question: what does this have to do with freedom, and its relationship to design that I asked after my personal introduction? Of course, the idea is for you to find your way in what I call—if I may be so bold—the space of Theory 1, theory in design practice. *To find your way and peak!*

I am assuming that, at this level, *we want the same thing*. But that's *not* freedom! Wait a minute… now I am inviting a discussion on what freedom *is*. So, let's ask instead: what does freedom *do*, when it doesn't speak. Because the freedom of *expression* is part of this. But *beyond* that: what does freedom do?

I think that a working definition of freedom could be *the transposition of a wicked problem to a situation where we can work with it*. This is not just psychology. It is likely to involve something made or built. To driven people, for instance, having a workshop equipped and structured by *experience* and the work of *time*, could be freedom.

Seek always the resident principles, and find them where they belong… in the job itself. Example: we are working at KHiO under the restrictions linked to the Corona pandemic, the injunctions and instructions of 1m distance are everywhere present. Here we have placed rondel of foil 2m apart.

The idea is not to be told about the 1m all the time, but to find it. So, this covers the former principle that I am quoting here: "seek always the resident principles." Then the same idea is reflected in the course: "find it where it belongs, in the job itself." These are from Norman Potter's Literalist Principles.

Start with *zero*, then seek the *resident* principles, and *find* them where they *belong*… in the *job* itself. There are 17 more principles, but these we'll do later on. I am referring you to the 3 first ones to conceive what David Pye called the 'craftsmanship of risk', as a candidate definition of design at KHiO/ONAA.

Or the design projects, that tend to hatch in the MA. The willingness to work *with* risk—just being in this room—is the price of freedom. It is based on the idea that freedom is not just up for grabs. There is a price to be paid. There is plenty of work to be done. The time is short. We cannot touch but we can be in touch.

"We cannot touch" that's the wicked problem. But can we locate tactility in the relation between vision and sound, visual an aural, seeing and hearing. My experience is that

putting in some effort in the audio-visual can locate tactility between the two, because work engages tactility at many levels.

I think that the MA2s located tactility in the book that is being presented to you, with their essays. More generally, locating tactility at a level where we can work with it does not solve the problem, but it can help us in creating a space that programmes for solutions. This is the idea of the learning theatre.

That is moving trouble into work, as a point of departure to investigate freedom. The right to work, as it were, but formulated a different level than we are used to. If our efforts are squared by connecting other senses, by design rather than by accident, we are in a space where we can work for solutions.

This idea of linking the tactile as the matrix—mother and interface—between the senses, has been elaborated on by a Finnish architect and phenomenologist Johani Pallasmaa, in a Book called the Eyes of the Skin. So, the theory is there, but we need to tell it what it is by inventing/designing sensory paths.

Is it a maker-space? Not really. Is it a place where we orient digital tools to our human life-world? Not only. Is it a place where we hatch our projects? Obliquely. Is it a space where we design programmes, in a sense of freeing ourselves of restrictions on what we can work on? Almost. Does it include ethics? Yes.