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Uses of Economic Rhetoric

– Told by Designers, Represented by Economic Press

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Abstract

The design discipline is constantly moving and reshaping itself. As the practices are often new and still evolving, the professionals in the field need to position their own activities to the context in which they are practiced (Valtonen, 2007). In the case of industrial design, the practice is conducted and increasingly discussed in the realm of the economic world. When issues such as global competitiveness or companies' competitive advantages are discussed, design is often seen as a mean to improve business. This is the case especially where (onko tämä where ok?) competing on merely price or technological advantage becomes increasingly difficult. This paper shows how the designers present industrial design as an economically viable action and how the economic press represents industrial design in the context of economy.

Keywords:

Economic Rhetoric; Industrial Design; Interviews; Media; Rhetorical Analysis

The connection of economy and industrial design is not a new construction. Our paper investigates the relationship of industrial design and economic rhetoric in Finland. Firstly, we cast a brief overview on the development of Finnish design in the economic context. Secondly, we discuss the role of language in economic rhetoric and make a connection between the rhetorical strategies and representing design. Lastly, we provide examples of using economic rhetoric extracted from interviews with designers and from the articles of economic press.

The economic rhetoric of the press and the speech acts of the industrial designers are compared using two extensive sets of data. About 600¹ articles from the Finnish economic press and in-depth interviews with 25 industrial designers have been used. The data was collected in the research project "The Shaping of the Professional Designer" funded by the Academy of Finland in 2004-2006. The method used in analysing the data is "close reading" suggested by Moisaner and Valtonen (2006). Particular interest is on how

¹ The economical papers the data was collected are *Kauppalehti* (KL/KLO, 'Business News'/'Business News Option'), *Taloussanomat* (TaSa, 'Economical News') and *Tekniikka&Talous* (T&T, 'Technology & Economy'). All of the text samples are originally in Finnish. Translation is made by the author.

different rhetoric strategies are applied both in economic press and in the designer interviews in order to connect industrial design to economically important issues. The research tradition of rhetoric provides different viewpoints, approaches and tools (see Burke, 1950; Perelman, 1982; Toulmin, 1958). In this study we refer especially to the development within rhetoric in economics that started in the 1980's (Klamer, 1984; Klamer et al., 1988; McCloskey, 1985). This study applies a rhetoric approach as a heuristic device through which the economic discussions within industrial design are described. We call the main themes of economic discussions "rhetoric strategies", which consist of the analysed key statements from the research material and their supportive elements. This area of inquiry is operationalised to research questions as follows:

- How are economic rhetoric and industrial design related in the analysed press articles and interviews?
- What kind of economic rhetorical strategies do both the industrial designers and the economic press apply in representations and speech concerning industrial design?
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As a result a system of economic rhetoric in industrial design is proposed. This system is based on three different strategies which depict industrial design in the economic context. These strategies are presented after a introduction to the basics of the economic rhetoric. Before that we will give a short review of the history of Finnish design.

A Short Economic overview to the History of Industrial Design in Finland

Design and crafts have a long history in Finland. Many Finnish companies, particularly those in the area of houseware and furniture, have used design for over a hundred years². Design viewed from the standpoint of design for industry thus has a long and colourful past. If, however, the focus is more specifically on the professional practice of industrial design, the development path is far shorter. The pioneers in industrial design in Finland appeared in the 1950s and industrial design education started in the 1960s, substantially later than in many other countries.

In the 1950s, Finland was a poor nation still recovering from the war, forced to pay large war reparations to the Soviet Union. The reparations created a need of new industries, and industrial structures in Finland developed strongly during this time (Karisto & Takala & Haapola, 1998, p. 57). The government and the local press used design to emphasize national identity and to improve the poor economic situation. This was the first larger economical context that design was connected to actively. The expression Finnish Design was born, and enhanced by individual designers such as Kaj Frank, Tapio Wirkkala, Timo Sarpaneva and Ilmari Tapiovaara. Although the individual designers were in the main focus, they were exploited also in terms of promoting the design

² Classic examples of Finnish companies that have used design very early are Arabia, Iris, Karhula, and Wärtsilä. (Kruskopf, 1989)

industry and its products. Great success in international competitions resulted in design being extensively discussed in the press³.

Most of the designs were tableware or artefacts in glass or wood, and were produced by the Finnish glass and porcelain companies Iittala, Arabia, Nuutajärvi and Karhula. In these companies, it was quite common to have a separate art department, where the designers created objects of art rather than utility products⁴. The meanings these art objects created were used in selling the companies mass-produced tableware goods. The companies' executives understood the economic role of design in marketing, persuading the users and consumers, the phenomenon was about branding before the term branding was recognized.

Early industrial design was performed by a few pioneering designers without any formal education in industrial design. The first industrial designers graduated from the Institute of Industrial Arts in Helsinki in 1965, and the industry, with companies such as Sisu, Upo, Valmet, Vallac and Salora gradually started to employ individuals from this new group of professionals. In the 1970s, industrial design established itself as a practice within industry. Industrial design was then used for producing different means of transportation, such as tractors and trucks, various types of engines and tools, hospital equipment, electronic products, and whiteware. The focus was on aesthetic and functional aspects in order to produce a competitive advantage.

In the 1970s, social responsibility gained a larger role in industrial design. The student revolutions, the oil crises, and strong left-wing politics all created an atmosphere where design for society and for the less fortunate became more important than design of new consumer goods. Much of the industrial design of the time was done in areas such as public transportation, machinery, and special equipment for user groups such as children and the elderly.

In the economic upswing of the 1980s, consumerism and money reappeared on the designers' agenda. In the late 1980s, the theories of design management gained larger attention in the Finnish design field, and several conferences were held on the issue⁵. Design was seen as an important means of unifying a company's product portfolio – and as a part in creating the corporate image. Besides the role of design in promoting, planning and producing consumer and investment goods the issues concerning consumers and end-users were argued on economical premises. The proportional advantage in the market and the power of the consumer were recognised.

³ A good description of Finnish participation in the Milan Triennials and related discourse can be found in Kalha, 1997; Kruskopf, 1989; Ratia et al., 1962.

⁴ Histories of Finnish art departments in the glass industry can be found for example in Koivisto, 2001 or at a more general level in Kruskopf, 1989.

⁵ The most important international example was the London Business School Design seminars (see Gorb, 1988). Several Design Management conferences were arranged at the University of Art and Design Helsinki (see Melgin, 1990; 1991).

Design management theories also launched the discussion on the most appropriate context in which to discuss industrial design. For example in newspapers, all applied arts issues had traditionally been discussed on the cultural pages. In several design management conferences and books, it was regarded as particularly important that industrial design issues should be discussed in the economic sections of the newspapers, and not on the cultural pages (Kuusi, 1990, pp. 8-9). The designers' aim was to redefine the role of industrial design, as part of the economic realm rather than only the cultural.

From Language Use to Rhetoric and Design

Most ideas in human interaction are communicated through language. The meaning of design, the issues of practice, and the general benefits of design are communicated through rhetorical devices. Language and rhetoric are central in the way the social world of design, organisations, management, and corporate policy are shaped (Buchanan, 1985, p. 4). In the Finnish design policy context the role of credible actors and the skilled use of rhetoric are clearly distinguished (Korvenmaa, 2001). Communicating design policy in Finnish economic press is also argued as a highly delicate action loaded with various discourses (Ryynänen, 2006).

Discussions usually proceed in the form of argumentation: presenting different statements and bringing forth arguments supporting the statement. An argument consists of one or several premises of which the conclusion is deduced or concluded. In addition, argumentation is based on a particular rhetoric situation. In our case these are discussions in economic press and designer interviews. In classical studies of rhetoric three elements in a speech situation were distinguished: *speaker*, *subject* (issue) and *audience* (Aristotle, 1984). In our study, the speakers of economic rhetoric are designers or other actors closely related to the design practice. The subjects or the focus of their speech are the interfaces between design and economic argumentation. The audience of the analysed research material are Finnish citizens and the design-related interest groups that are intended to be convinced by the use of economic rhetoric.

The latest wave in studying economic rhetoric began in the early 1980s. The starting point was the critical assessment of speech of the economists and the premises they built on their arguments. A central theme was the integration of human conversation and rhetorical actions to aspects from outside and inside economics (McCloskey, 1985; Klamer et al., 1988). Economic rhetoric is increasingly important also in the field of industrial design, since designers are deeply concerned with persuasion and negotiation in all the matters that they seek to advance with clients and the general public. The issue of argument in design is important because designers seek a middle course between the analytic and statistical arguments of engineers, marketing experts, and social scientists. (Buchanan, 2001, p. 192).

This study is grounded in rhetoric of the economical benefit, in the vein pioneered by Donald McCloskey (1985). He stressed that economic discourse comprises a far richer variety of argumentation than syllogism and measurement, which are the official modes of our contemporary academic discourse in economics. Metaphor, narrative and other unofficial rhetorical

devices are crucial to an understanding of economical issues taking place in society. A rhetorical perspective holds that all discourse aims to influence a particular audience. The rhetorical strategies preferred by the practitioners of a discipline reflect their view on what it is that can be known. (Backhouse et al., 1993, p. 7).

McCloskey identifies rhetoric as the realm of persuasion (McCloskey, 1994, p. 41). A central tenet of the approach is that the criteria for assessing the validity of scientific arguments emerge within the discourse itself – beyond the actual scientific discourse there is no “safe metalinguistical level” (McCloskey, 1994, p. 201). What determines the acceptability of arguments of profitability in design representations is the persuasion of the participants giving the public statements. Despite this, while the role of an individual is important in generating economic benefit related design arguments, they cannot be understood independently of the social structures and cultural backgrounds in which they are embedded (Lawson, 1997).

Richard Buchanan (1985, pp. 8-9) has suggested that there are four elements of design arguments: one is the idea of the designer as a speaker who fashions a world and invites others to share it. Another is the idea of an audience of users who may be persuaded to adopt new ways and means to achieve objectives in their lives. A third is the idea of practical life as the subject of design communication. According to Buchanan, most important is the fourth, argument, which connects all of the elements of design (technological reasoning, character, and emotion) and becomes an active engagement between designer and potential user. In this paper we, however, seek to extend the idea of rhetoric further. We argue that designers are using rhetoric acts in order to persuade other actors of society to support the design agenda. Particularly we are interested in how designers and design related groups argue the benefits of design through economic rhetoric.

Economic Rhetoric Strategies in Design

We found that the design arguments for the rhetorical idea are usually two-fold. The connection of design and economy is argued through economical premises, for example profit or efficiency are such factors. On the other hand there is a value premise which incorporates various positive societal consequences. Ethical commitments can be included in these positive issues: efficiently designed products generate less waste and are more ecological. Or user-centred design benefits the user while it produces economical advantage for the manufacturing company. Both an economical premise and a value premise will backup each other providing a functional argument for the chosen rhetorical strategy.

We will examine the design related economic rhetoric shortly through the speakers, forums and audience which constitute the situational elements. In the economic press and in the designer interviews we will pay attention to their rhetoric strategy. The elements of rhetoric strategy are “the core claim” and various “rhetoric tactics”. The core claim is basically the issue the speaker wants to communicate to the audience, and the tactics embody the means or arguments the speaker will provide to backup her core claim. There is a variety of distinguished rhetorical tactics in research literacy, but our approach is more research material led (for rhetorical tactics see: Perelman,

1982; McCloskey, 1985). Rhetorical tactics can be constructed from arguments that are connected to the core claim. In the following sections we will present the results of our analysis – the three different rhetoric strategies within industrial design and the economic press.

Classical economic rhetoric

There has been an increase of economic rhetoric since the 1980's. Since then design discussions have increasingly moved to the economic sphere. Research in Finnish economic rhetoric, for example specialist conversations concerning EFTA-free trade solution (Heinonen, 1992), budget speeches of Ministers of Finance (Heinonen, Mykkänen, Pantzar & Ropponen, 1997, p. 45) and budget representation of the Ministers of Finance (Heinonen, Mykkänen, Pantzar & Ropponen, 1996) emphasise certain economic core factors, such as gross (total) production, the rate of inflation and the role of employment. Investments, competitiveness, export sales and deficit in the balance of current payments also came up. Private consumption did not seem to have a significant role in the sphere of economic rhetoric (Heinonen et al., 1997, p. 45). In our study material the designers use general level arguments concerning for example nations' competitiveness when promoting design or getting public recognition for design. On a business or company level the selection of economic rhetorical devices are defined in terms of investments in design and promoting the relative competitive advantage a company possesses.

A good example of this approach is when the Design Manager of Metso Paper, Risto Väättänen, describes the benefits of industrial design in press:

"Through design, the Metso concern saves money. A saving of just a few per cent is already remarkable. Design simply cuts costs by reducing the material needed for making the product. Another way of reducing costs is to reduce the amount of parts used. Good design also makes the product faster to produce, which improves the turnover of capital." (KL 21.10.2002)

The rhetorical strategy is a classical one - that is to say it emphasizes that good design equals good business. This is achieved by using tactical rhetoric terms such as efficiency and productivity. The speaker or writer seeks to provide the audience with the reasons for adopting a new attitude or taking a new course of action. In this sense, rhetoric is an art of shaping society, changing the course of individuals and communities, and setting patterns for new action. (Buchanan, 1985, p. 6). On the other hand, the design historian Adrian Forty (1986) has shown that designers are seldom the final judges in product development. The economic issues surrounding product development connect a variety of people and the choices are usually argued on the ground of economic realm.

For the industrial designers this way of approaching design tends to be self evident. An increasing amount of companies are using design, and its management in the economical context has become a commonplace activity. As one of the interviewed designers describes this change:

"Currently more and more companies realise the value and benefits of design. I have used the example of marketing managers – imagine if

there wouldn't be one in a company. That would be a pretty awkward situation, wouldn't it? Who would then commission and direct the advertising agencies? It is exactly the same situation with design."

Although the thought of good design equalling good business is one supported by the economic press, they do not always appear convinced that their readers have understood this. Many of the articles aim to describe to its audience that this is really the case – that design makes an economic difference.

*"(...) design is a strategic tool, which has an influence on organisational structures when the goal is to improve products' usability, appearance and technical quality. **Design solutions have an influence also on the fluency of the manufacturing and for that matter it generates cost savings.** At its best, design matches up a product and a service, a communication and a company's identity to a viable entity. This could be understandable, usable and even enjoyable." (TalSa 14.3.2001, bold added)*

Sometimes design is also perceived as a benefit not only to one company's success but the larger societal whole. This way of defining design is used particularly by different agencies promoting design. Lately it has been a very topical issue through the arrival of the Finnish design policy that was very tightly intertwined with the national innovation policy. The aim is to show that design not only improves business, but improves the larger national economy.

This is a strategy that has been supported both by the designers as the press. One of the interviewed designers says:

"I would want to see design as a national economic issue. Besides the electronics- and paper industries we will get more industries that are essential for the nations' development. (...) Within ten years the situation has improved significantly. The future couldn't be brighter for design."

The economic press repeats the same thought:

"Countries that do not have a long design tradition like Finland does, have noticed that design is a considerable factor (...) It is crucial to understand that design has both economical and societal influence. There is also a strong cultural effect (...)" (T&T 28. 10. 1999).

"How important is design for the competitiveness of the Finnish industry, Minister of Culture Tanja Karpela? - The aim of the design policy, which the Council of State has approved, is to connect design to the national innovation policy. The idea is to define the role of design as part of the competitiveness of the manufacturing and service industries. International reports show the importance of design to companies' competitiveness. Design is a knowledge intensive field and therefore it has an extremely important role in improving the economic and societal competitiveness." (KLO 15.4.2004)

The designers' strive to acquire support from "hard economic facts" is understandable and even advisable, particularly when persuading representatives of business. The use of economic rhetoric might also seem beneficial from the designer aspect. However, there are also some caveats

and risks. It is worth noticing that there are rules in the game called economic rhetoric. If the logic of business economics is not clearly understood or the "system of convincing" is not recognised properly the economic rhetorical devices and arguments could turn out to be ill-defined or inappropriate for the situation at hand. In addition, the used economically viable arguments should have some substance in concrete design practice. Designers should recognise the foundations of economic rhetoric: in many cases it is based on economic-political neo-liberalism. The economic rhetoric is also grounded on power-mechanisms that concern ever growing effectiveness and economic benefits. Applying economic rhetoric as such and without a critical attitude commits the speaker to, even if implicitly, to those that believe, produce and maintain the economic rhetoric. This means that by using economic language the user also accepts the world view this system provides. Designers should evaluate or at least be aware of their position in promoting economic discourse.

Focusing economical arguments on the user and consumer

The general level of economic rhetoric mostly excludes private consumption. However, consumers and users are clearly recognised and highlighted in communicating the economic benefits design can provide. It is frequently stated that consumers choose successful design: consumers approve and buy certain products and increasingly this act of consumption is based, at least partly, on design factors. The increasing consumption of designed goods appears beneficial for the company, and has positive effects on national economy in terms of increasing tax income and improvement of a nations' image.

The Finnish designers have emphasized the importance of end-users since the 1960s. This has been done through the science of ergonomics. By emphasising ergonomics, the industrial designers positioned themselves as more scientific than other areas of applied arts. The issue of ergonomics or usability has not disappeared from the area of industrial design; on the contrary, it gained an even more pronounced role with the arrival of computers and electronic displays on products. As the products became more complex, usability issues grew increasingly important. The broader view of usability and end-user understanding has today become the starting point for all successful industrial design.

"In my opinion design has an important role at the beginning of the product development process. The deeper understanding of design then has to do with human values, with human beings and customers. Later on in the process, technological issues come in. Technology should come after we know what is good and necessary for the end-user. And how the human being really wants to act."

The designers have thus talked about their professional practice as a benefit to the end user since the 1960s. In the economic press this rhetoric starts appearing more strongly in the 1980s. However, the economic press does not talk about the end-user, but about the customer or the consumer.

"Everything starts from the company's business idea, and how a firm wants them to be seen from the customers' and the interest groups'

point of view. (...) in the product development projects it will become a common practice to employ designers. In order to reach the optimal outcome, it is important that a designer is brought into the project from the very beginning." (TalSa 29.11.2000)

Although the use of this rhetoric strategy starts at different points in time for the designers and the press, and although they use slightly different terms – user or consumer – this is clearly a rhetoric strategy that is preferred by both.

Focusing on the designer as an individual

Despite the fact that the designers and the economic press appear to agree on most of the rhetoric strategies, there is one way to talk about design that doesn't always get the undisputed acceptance of the designers. This is when the economic press approaches design through showing designers as interesting individuals.

The first pioneers in Finnish industrial design were artist-designers who gradually transferred to the industrial realm. The role of the designer was then consequentially that of an artist, and the new service was first marketed using the same tools that had proved so successful in promoting artefacts in international exhibitions: the personal charisma of the designer.

In the 1960s, when the first educated industrial designers were hired directly by companies, the end result of their work was no longer marketed with the name of the designer but with the name of the company. Initially, the designers faced the challenge of often being perceived as artists in industry.

"We were industrial designers then, yes. Our title was industrial designer even if they called us artists in the (corporate) hallways. (laughs)"

People tend to be interested in other people, and products with an interesting designer-character behind them get more attention. Despite the designers' aversion to this type of publicity, this is a rhetoric strategy that is still frequently used by the press. There is a human interest involved – the press wants to depict interesting people, because that is something that interests their readers.

Even Risto Väättänen, who works in the heavy industry and whose statements were previously used as an example of emphasising only the economic benefits of design, has been portrayed through individual stories and memories by the press.

"Today the Design Manager of Metso, Risto Väättänen, receives the Kaj Franck award. The award, founded by Design Forum Finland, is awarded yearly to a distinguished designer or design group. (...) His first contact with Kaj Franck was in the Institute of Industrial Arts in Helsinki, where Franck taught. –Franck was a big name. (...) Väättänen was surprised by the fact that Franck wanted to award the talented designer. – Franck gave me the book Transport Design, with his own inscription. I was even more surprised when Franck as the artistic director of Arabia hired me as his assistant when I graduated." (KL 20.11.2003)

This approach is typically used when a designer has gained a personal prize. Sometimes this approach is also used deliberately when the press feasts on

very personal details from the designers private lives. Some of the professional industrial designers tend to view this type of publicity with aversion, and refer to it as “showing your wardrobe” or to the people concerned as “hero designers” in the interviews:

“My former boss called them hero-designers – designers who do not necessary do good design but who frequently figure in the press and have connections. They are good at promoting themselves, but sometimes the design they do is not good design at all. (...) They frequent all sorts of social events and parade everywhere. And then your average designer, such as me, wonders how they have time for all of that. Don't they work at all?”

Personal press coverage might thus benefit the individual designer, but due to striving away from the designer/artist image it is not always valued by the professional realm of industrial designers. In the context of economic rhetoric bringing a designer into the discussion otherwise mechanical and “cold” economic terms get a human face. The rhetorical strategy is to highlight individuals and their roles. On a tactical level specialist statements are used in order to assure the economic benefits. Thus, the issue for the economic press is not in promoting an individual –but in giving justifications for initially economic ambitions.

Conclusions

In shaping the professional practice the choice of economic rhetoric is a way to align the design practice to the economic context. In this paper we have defined three rhetoric strategies that are used. One of the rhetoric strategies, classical economic rhetoric and emphasising the larger context, is used and preferred both by the economic press and the designers. The designers also prefer to talk about the end-users. The press approaches the same topic, but from a slightly different angle, emphasizing the customer or the consumer. The third rhetoric strategy, to emphasize the individual traits of one designer, is a strategy preferred by the press as it creates interesting stories for its readers. Although this might be a strategy that is beneficial for the individual designer that is portrayed, in general the designers are not so keen on this type of publicity for the profession. This is probably due to the fact that they have spent the first decades of their professional existence explaining that they are not artists, but team players just as anybody else in the product development realm. The strategy is thus contradictory, promoting design in economic terms is acceptable but at the same time the personal publicity of a designer is not always appreciated.

In this paper we have shown that economic terminology was largely connected to design in the early 1980's in Finland, when industrial design became increasingly important for the industry. Secondly, the role of the consumer and the user in the rhetoric choices has increased steadily since the 1980's. Thirdly, macro economical thinking has been moved to the field of industrial design – the same rhetoric conventions that are used to describe economic success are also used to describe successful industrial design. Fourthly, rhetoric choices are often driven by fairly universal economic conceptual systems that tend to reshape also the way industrial design is seen. These rhetoric choices slowly become accepted as the perceived reality

through the press and the designers' presentations. Fifthly, the industrial designers consciously use economic rhetoric to drive both the prominence of design in society and their own business. When design issues are linked to the larger social and economic context they gain larger acceptance. This also increases the credibility of design.

Using economic rhetoric as justification for design also has its challenges— in the use of economic rhetoric there lays fallacies if the concrete substance of design practice is not brought into light and argued properly. As researchers in economic rhetoric have observed, ideas do not reside in a conversational vacuum - influence depends greatly upon our ability to convey them, and upon our audience's ability to understand them. (Cordes et al., 1993, p. 461). Government policies and actions of large companies rest on and are argued for through economic ideas, but such ideas are not necessarily the most suitable for all situations. Copying ideas or repeating the economic "buzz-words" could do harm without actual substance.

This paper shows different ways that economic rhetoric are used in the design context – in order to help identifying them, to improve them and to be able to discard those rhetoric phrases that do not contain any real content. If the designers can benefit from explicit talk about rhetorical concerns, those who are interested in rhetoric can benefit even more from studying how design continues to influence and shape society by its persuasive assertions. (Buchanan, 1985, p. 22). This paper suggests that although the two realities of the economic press and the work of the industrial designers might differ from each other, they are also tightly interconnected and in constant interplay with each other.

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