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Workshop: “The European Province”

I will here attempt to problematize the three questions posed by the workshop organizers. My perspective, coming from Finland, geographically from the outskirts of Europe, is Nordic and more generally European. But first some overall remarks.

At the World Congress of Art History in Washington year 1986 I discussed the issue of an cultural and artistic province with the renown Polish art historian Jan Bialystocki. He had just published his opus magnum, *The Art of Renaissance in Eastern Europe*. Western European and American art history had always treated that region as a periphery, even province neglecting for example the great works of Renaissance in Poland. This led him to elaborate on the concepts of center, province and periphery. We all recognize a center, dominating not only a nation but a wider realm. Provinces, on the other hand, depend on the centers from where they receive impulses which they perpetuate without much original input or innovation. The relationship of center and province also depends largely on the geographical proximity. A classical example is the influence of early 20th century Vienna within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The concept of periphery is much more complex. A periphery, even being far from the dominating centers, can be selective and integrate elements from a multitude of centers. This leads to the concept of the innovative periphery which is able to produce a synthesis from its own creativity enriched with newest influences from the centers, thus not being dominated by them but choosing what is seen vital in creating an original, regional expression topical for the periphery in question. This requires certain inner maturity from the periphery, of its culture of design, architecture and art. Without that the receiving part – periphery – can not assimilate the impulses taken from the sending part – center – in a creative and original manner.

So now coming back to the question nr. 1 I will use Finland as case in writing design history from the periphery. – Throughout its history Finland had been both periphery and

province. Geographically at the far corner of Europe, politically first tied to Sweden since early Middle Ages, then from 1809 to Empire of the Romanovs, Russia., the dominating centers being Stockholm and then St. Petersburg. Impulses – styles, fashions – from these centers were adapted in a provincial manner. In the wave of industrialization starting with economic liberalism in 1860s the picture changed. In the 1870s the Finnish “system” of design was laid out, with its main operators in education, promotion, professionalism and memory (museum) still functioning an co-operating today. Now the periphery became activated, looking for “best practices” from several centers like Great Britain, Berlin and Vienna. The result was organizational but not touching the issues of style, expression or taste. The main goal was to emulate the centers in order to rise to the same level, regarding also the design-related domains of production in glass, ceramics and textile.

So how to make a deliberate move from province to an innovative periphery? Design never operates in a vacuum hence it needs a supporting context. In Finland, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, this was provided by the greater project of nation-building where the whole institutional infrastructure of the Autonomous Grand Duchy was geared towards creating a distinctive Finnish society and culture. In this process the domestic education in architecture, design and arts developed rapidly, producing a cohort of young talents maturing in the last decades of the 19th century. Their practice was boosted by the global economic boom ending in the trenches of WWI. And what they tried to achieve was a regional expression, not any more being an adaptive province but an active, innovative periphery. And here they also succeeded. The Finnish Pavilion at Paris World Fair 1900 was a major breakthrough in architecture and design. Continental journals began to publish on new Finnish architecture and craft. So, the mix of impulses from centers fused together with local talent, supported by a greater context of developing the whole country was able to make this quantum leap from province into a selective, innovative periphery – still geographically at the fringe but not any more culturally. By the early 20th century Finland had become a sub-center, in the manner of Glasgow and Barcelona. Simultaneously it had created its own provinces, exerting serious influence in architecture in the Baltic provinces of Estonia and Latvia.

The approach, even strategy, sketched above was adapted also after Finland became independent in 1917 as well as in the surprisingly rapid march to the forefront of international design after the WWII. Even in the 50s or even 60s Finland was a rather poor, agricultural country with difficulties to physically reach the centers of Continental or American centers of design. Still, regarding its scarce population and national wealth, the country was a major player on the international design scene. It had become a center.

So what does this entail to writing “from the periphery”, being involved in the knowledge production of the national design history? One typical fallacy would be to exaggerate the national achievement due to a long-lasting minority complex of being dominated by greater nations politically or by the dominating centers. In my book *Finnish Design. A Concise History* (University of Art and Design, Helsinki 2009; to be relaunched by Victoria&Albert Museum Publishers 2014) I have tried to avoid that. But it is only to be judged by the readers and critics from the international community. The voice from the

periphery, even from one with a great legacy of design, can easily be provincial, even chauvinistic in portraying a success story and leaving failures out from the story. Why is that so? Because peripheries, weaker than self-reliant centers, constantly need to create and re-create their past, in order to survive today and tomorrow.

And then question nr.2. – I see the question wrongly positioned. Great Britain ceased to be the workshop of the world already after WWII and then the US taking over well before East Asia. As a now rusty billboard in Trenton, New Jersey from the 60s says: Trenton makes, the world takes. But today, of course, we are in a situation where East Asia, mainly China dominates the production on the global scene. Not yet the design but with the pace of development in the design education in China also the emphasis of product development, design and related industries will soon lie there. And not forgetting the impressive achievements of South Korea. Also Japan, with its highly developed design culture remains a major player but the country has infrastructural and demographic problems hindering its dynamics. India still remains a questionmark but comprises a huge potential.

But Europe becoming a (design) province – and how does all this affect present and future design history exploration? One can only give speculative answers. Globalwise Europe is already a provincial region considering the Pacific Rim. Still, in design it can to a certain degree rely on its past achievements, education and innovative individuals and consultancies. For a while. For future design history writing it will be interesting to portray the global shift we are now experiencing but hardly able to grasp and analyze.

And finally the question nr. 3. – Naturally there have been periods where Europe has not been central at all. We just have to think about the immense repository and the past of craft and design in East Asia that flourished when Europe was just trying to rise as a region and as nation states from the Early Middle Ages onwards. And not only that, also the design history/histories of the more recent developments in East Asia is not at all covered. And, as we know, it is the winners who write the history so the almost colonialistic, anglo-centered view has dominated the portrayal of the past. But, as we know, serious efforts have been recently done to alter this situation. Very soon we will have the – they are already widely emerging – voices of design history researchers from all corners of the world, giving their local colour to the multinational palette. This is also the agenda of the ICDHS.

