Conclusion

Designing a Social Cosmology

I have argued in this book that the expertise required to cultivate and re-
produce Swedish design—and to enregister its forms as stable, recogniz-
able, and meaningful—is distributed and dispersed, and in many ways
necessarily so. I began by outlining the basic contours of the final vo-
cabulary of Swedish design—functional, ethical, accessible, democratic,
egalitarian—highlighting a parallel moral of "care" shared between de-
scriptions of both social democratic ideologies and design in Sweden.
Such discourse, often taking the form of ambient material and linguistic
"enunciations," saturates the everyday lived world in Sweden. It appears
in newspapers, magazines, and street advertisements, in store catalogs and
displays, on television programs and in museum exhibitions, its force but-
tressed by the ubiquitous presence of design tokens in the experienced
built environment. Indeed, this discourse is not configured as a distant or
disembodied appeal to a utopic vision of *the way life should be*, but rather is
squarely oriented toward reminding the public that *this is the way life is*, a
life enhanced by the ostensibly obvious power of everyday goods.

But as I also admitted at the start, in order to understand the logics, trajectories, and forms of how design works in Sweden as a kind of soft power, I have consciously overstated my point. The spread of objects that bear the cultural geometry is quite wide in Sweden, but it is not utterly endemic. The final vocabulary is well known and easily recognizable, but it is not on the lips of every Swedish man, woman, and child. Indeed, the politics of form is sometimes very explicit, but most of the time it is subtle and understated, if it is even stated outright at all. And while twenty-first-century Sweden remains a welfare society through and through, the *folkhem*, both the resonant concept and the strong welfare state that it represented, has been dismantled. And while modernist design still holds strong sway in Sweden, it is not the only lauded style in the Swedish design world. Nonetheless *svensk design*, and the family resemblances linking political ideas and material forms in the everyday world, carry on.

This study emerged from a long-term ethnographic project in Stockholm attuned to the multiple rich textures of social life in Sweden, and as such has attempted to account for and draw out a collection of different contexts in which both the lines of visibility and the lines of enunciation that detail the diagram of Swedish design thrive. I have followed a range of seemingly disparate symbolic domains alongside one another not because they all necessarily relate in any *direct* fashion, but because they all in their own ways—making design, marking design, and making design mean—constitute the complex and continuous reinstantiation of Swedish design as a politico-material assemblage, submerged in the everyday world, which, despite its uneven ontological state, resonates palpably in Swedish society.

I began my analysis in the home, where *svensk design* first crystallized at the intersection of domestic life, form, beauty, and social improvement. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the home emerged as a material/ideological formation seized on by both social activists and the Social Democratic Party in Sweden as a critical site for incrementally instantiating political reform in everyday life. Technocratic experts like Gunnar and Alva Myrdal worked to link the "real conditions" of the mundane world to the objectives of social policy—that is, they pushed a political goal to transform society for the better by developing and reconfiguring the circumstances in the home, the most basic and common sort of occupied social space. But this was not simply a matter of socially engineering the material

conditions of domestic life. Alongside their housing reform enterprise the Social Democrats pushed a resonant discursive frame, the *folkhem*, as a metaphorical reglossing of the welfare state project, effectively recasting the nature of the state in terms of the familiar textures of everyday living. As these political aspirations emerged and matured, prominent activists like Ellen Key and Gregor Paulsson strongly advocated a considered sort of beauty—not just in art, but also in everyday objects and interiors—as a key ethical mechanism for enacting social change in everyday life. And as modernist style evolved and spread across Europe and in Sweden, a set of particular simple and rational design forms surfaced as the principal tokens of a kind of beauty that was treated as the most effective for initiating the sort of social change the Social Democrats had envisioned. In the early days, when both the final vocabulary and cultural geometry were new and vibrant, the politics of *svensk design* was rather clear and overt, an aim the authors of the hugely influential *acceptera* had set out to accomplish. But as time moved on, the explicit complementarity of ideology and form became increasingly more subtle and muted, and in some respects, increasingly taken for granted.

Jumping forward in time to the contemporary design world, where the cultural geometry persists but the final vocabulary is considered old-fashioned and outdated, the ideological conditions originally established by those early twentieth-century activists and technocrats continue to powerfully give shape and sentiment to the work that young designers do. Very few designers consider themselves to be social interventionists whose work directly solves some specific and pressing social problem. But they do see their work as inflected with an ethics of care, even if that ethics is less direct than what the progenitors of *svensk design* had advocated. Yet even as young designers resist the overdetermined politics of design, they still participate in its reproduction. In their efforts to run a viable design firm, to make a name for themselves and earn enough money to live successful, comfortable lives, designers oscillate between anxiously overlapping economic, aesthetic, and social fields—an oscillation that renders the objects they design semiotically unstable and subject to certain politicized glosses and redescriptions. In seeking meaningful recognition that might redound to their identities not as technicians but as artisans, designers place their work—their heteroglossic artifacts—in domains like exhibitions, magazines, and books that are in large part controlled by differently

interested social actors, and it is here, despite the designers' desires to de-politicize their work, where the lines of visibility and enunciation are most often drawn together. Thus in the everyday textures of the Swedish design world the politics of design is variably articulated—sometimes easy, and sometimes uncomfortable—but always imminently haunting the objects that designers produce.

The cultural geometry, though, remains quite durable in the objects those designers create. The political glossings and redescriptions that cura-tors, authors, and design historians bring to Swedish design cannot simply be asserted. They need forms that credibly tolerate those glossings, which modernist forms—simple, rational, functional forms that, it is argued, re-semble the contours of welfare politics—have historically done. While the semiotic flows linking many of the most prominent sites within the design world produce artifacts that are, from one perspective, heteroglossic, im-bued with the voices of the different social actors who contribute to their production, the design studio itself often operates as a machine for preserv-ing and regenerating the cultural geometry. The studio is not a domain of politics, but a domain of form, where the lines of visibility are crafted and recrafted within the language games that constitute designing in practice. Amid the order-words that structure ways of working, talking, and think-ing in the studio the cultural geometry is kept alive and granted a privi-leged position over other sorts of forms. Rarely does the final vocabulary seep into these interactions, and rarely is the cultural geometry invoked as an explicit formal ideal. Instead habitual, structured, and utterly mundane linguistic, gestural, and graphic practices, in combination and over time, continually contribute to the replication of a relatively small set of formal features in design objects. Interactional practices between designers are, then, in a very real sense, a critical and indeed fundamental site for the reproduction of Swedish design.

One of the most common points where the design world and the ev-eryday world converge outside of the domestic sphere itself is in particular sites of display. Across Sweden a network of institutions like museums, galleries, stores, and trade shows harness direct experience both to mark everyday objects as "Swedish," interpellating Swedish design as a culturally significant category, and to manifest a politics of comfort and care in the particular arrangement of domestically oriented artifacts. If the beautiful home has historically been treated as a site of political reform in Sweden,

these indexicalizing heterotopias do the work of revealing the semiotic links between home life and a politics of care in Swedish design by offering the opportunity to experience this relationship firsthand. The family resemblances linking these sites and their work have echoed through Swedish society for over a century. Civic expositions like Stockholm 1930 and Helsingborg 1955 were quite explicitly politically inclined and significantly promoted the Swedish design industry. Today the National Museum's design exhibit collects and curates heritage tokens of Swedish design, and smaller temporary shows in museums and galleries celebrate the output of contemporary Swedish designers. Ikea, too, explicitly celebrates Swedish design, while exploiting the final vocabulary in its branding and product descriptions. Moreover, Ikea, like the Stockholm Furniture Fair, mirrors the form of old civic expositions in the construction of consumer sites, recreating comfortable domestic spaces that iconically represent possible real homes, promoting a subtle ambient semiosis that indirectly indexes a long history of politicized living spaces. In these sites Swedes are reminded that Swedish design exists and of what it looks like and what it does.

Swedish design, then, is enregistered as a culturally durable set of things and ideas through the variegated interrelations among such symbolic domains as history, markets, design interactions, and the dynamics of social space, including public and private environments, city neighborhoods, and various design-oriented heterotopias. The levels of symbolic manipulation and the different ways in which they impinge on the production of design as a cultural system rely on "semiosis across encounters," in Asif Agha's (2005) phrasing, throughout an array of contexts in which the products of human action flow. Indeed, each such context leaves behind its own patina of semiotic residue on objects passing through, sometimes readily noticeable and sometimes unconsciously intuited as objects travel from domain to domain. Interactions weave into the fabric of history as the residue of design activities is left in forms. The communicative force of aesthetic forms accrues to common household goods as the residue of art settles on commercial objects. Displayed in heterotopic spaces and configured alongside statements of the final vocabulary, these objects acquire specific ideological associations that bleed into everyday life once they are sold and bought.

Lines of enunciation—politicized utterances focused on beauty, care, practicality, rationality, and egalitarianism—and lines of visibility—unadorned forms like straight lines, right angles, and clear surfaces that ostensibly bear

some iconic family resemblance to those utterances—these are what constitute the diagram of Swedish design, all of which are drawn together as they move through the cultural domains I have just elaborated. To be sure design is in general *political* in all sorts of ways in all sorts of contexts, and the Swedish case is not in its broadest strokes unique. However, there is, I have argued, something particular about the way design works in Sweden that I think lends this diagram a distinct inflection. If such a thing can be said to exist, its Swedishness derives from the particularities of the trajectories of both politics and the design industry in Sweden, and the relations that have historically held between them. Over the course of the twentieth century an otherwise widely shared social democratic political system developed in specific ways in Sweden, distinct even from its Nordic neighbors, the hallmarks of which included a commitment to particular morally inclined ideals like cross-class solidarity, the intentional construction of a large middle class, and a commitment to broad-based participatory democracy as the core political form. Moreover, Sweden's neutral stance during both world wars contributed significantly to the uninterrupted development and implementation of social democratic policies and ideologies, a situation unparalleled in other European states. What that means is that the ideas and ideals underpinning social democracy have dominated Swedish politics for decades, so much so that they have become over time immanent features of Swedish cultural life.

From the start, collaboration between those with political power and those working in design has mattered, giving form to Swedish society. Ellen Key's participation in the initial formation of the SAP, and the friendships between Gunnar and Alvar Myrdal and the organizers of the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 (and the authors of *acceptera*) prefigure contemporary associations between the Swedish government and organizations like Svensk Form tasked with promoting and cultivating Swedish design in a wider public context. And contemporary Swedish firms with international reputations, like Volvo, H&M, and especially Ikea (even if, as in the case of Volvo, they are no longer Swedish-owned), rely on design as a key feature of their global brands, thereby reinforcing the significance of Swedish design both inside and outside Sweden.

There is, of course, plenty of critique of this neat and tidy picture of Swedishness and Swedish design circulating in Sweden, much of which often invokes the language of "myth" (e.g., Ahl and Olsson 2002; Halén

and Wickman 2003; Tell 2004), in the "not true" sense of the word. But I think that such a reading misses the point. Whether or not everyday goods are "true" reflections of social democratic ideologies is ultimately an unverifiable point. It is a claim, an argument, a language game of sorts, and as such it is always subject to the details constituting the contexts in which the claim is made. However, there is certainly something quite *hegemonic* about the relationship between welfare politics and design in Sweden, in Antonio Gramsci's original sense of that term.

For Gramsci, hegemony centered on moral leadership and class solidarity as core requirements for effecting wide-scale social change. In contrast to the way the term is often used, hegemony was not a totalizing authoritarian structure designed to dupe individuals through the imposition of false consciousness, but rather a mechanism geared, in part, toward shaping collective consensual belief, or what Gramsci called "common sense." But while common sense may be broadly shared, it is by no means innate or basic—instead it is always "a product of history and a part of the historical process" (Gramsci 2000:327). Critical in this process, though, is the necessary plausibility of ideology. For Gramsci hegemonic political systems may work to help give shape to common sense, but that shaping unfolds not through dominance or coercion, but through the persuasive pull of plausibility:

> It is evident that this kind of mass construction cannot just happen "arbitrarily," around any ideology, simply because of the formally constructive will of a personality or a group which puts it forward solely on the basis of its own fanatical philosophical or religious convictions. Mass adhesion or non-adhesion to an ideology is the very critical test of the rationality and historicity of modes of thinking. Any arbitrary constructions are pretty rapidly eliminated by historical competition, even if sometimes, through a combination of immediately favorable circumstances, they manage to enjoy popularity of a kind; whereas constructions which respond to the demands of a complex organic period of history always impose themselves and prevail in the end, even though they may pass through several intermediary phases during which they affirm themselves only in more or less bizarre and heterogeneous combinations. (341)

In other words, the persistence of ideologies and the cultural forms in which they manifest is not determined solely by the imposition of force or political will but is always sustained by real, felt connections between

ideologies and material conditions. From this perspective, then, the final vocabulary and cultural geometry, conspicuous manifestations of social democratic hegemony, function as "forms of cultural organization which keep the ideological world in movement" (342) in Sweden not because the state and other social actors have, through the years, forcefully *insisted* on it, but because the insisted claims have in various ways resonated with people's experiences.

To be sure, the particular moral accents that color the relationship between politics and design can be read in several different ways from the same set of facts. In this book I have taken seriously the relatively positive valence of Swedish design that posits a harmonious relationship between the goals of social democratic governance and the development of *svensk design*. Among other reasons, I have followed this line partly because, despite periodic opposition, it is the dominant form the Swedish design narrative has taken, and as such that form deserves consideration and contemplation rather than immediate critique. But another reason—one that is harder to admit to—is because, as an outsider to the system, a peripheral character in the narrative, I feel like there really is something to it. But to recognize that "something" does not, of course, foreclose other possible critical interpretations. It is quite conceivable to discern the socially beneficial sides of Swedish design while at the same time recognizing its function as an apparatus of mundane governance that instantiates a situated "grid of intelligibility of the social order" (Foucault 1978:93) for both a state in need of controlling its citizens and a public pressed into conformity. Indeed, maintaining "the simple economic geometry of a 'house of certainty'" (Foucault 1977:202) is a necessary procedure for any state project invested in politicized design, whether those politics lean more toward advantaging populations and individuals than disadvantaging them. In other words, whether the political utility of design like the kind evident in Sweden is for liberal or illiberal purposes, the mechanism of its operation is largely the same. How one glosses it, though, is a matter of rhetoric, disposition, and interpretation.

In this book I have also made an argument for analytically detaching symbols from closed contexts of interpretation and expanding the scope of inquiry to encompass a wider view of how symbols are crafted at multiple degrees of magnification. In particular, this entails examining how certain forms become imbued with cultural meanings in a range of different contexts and looking closely at how particular semiotic relationships are

brought together, patterned, and naturalized across time and social space. Moreover, I have argued for understanding how processes of symbolization are accomplished and put into motion. Cultural meanings are *made* meanings, achieved through the actions of those who hold some stake in their continued existence. To be sure, culture itself, an intricate lattice-work of mere phenomena artificially transformed into symbols, is "an 'as if' made into an 'is' by the seriousness of those who use it" (Wagner 1986:8). Only through active and sustained *engagement* with signs across diverse cultural domains—creating them and recreating them, challenging them and defending them—can cultural meanings persist, develop, and indeed compel individuals to invest in them. All of the practices in which the Swedish cultural geometry and final vocabulary are reproduced, from design activities to turning on a lamp, reveal a literal "cosmology in the making," to borrow Fredrik Barth's (1987) phrase, a careful shaping of the physical contours of the Swedish social universe.

Thus the myth of Swedish design is, in fact, real. Perhaps one reason people in Sweden are invested in maintaining design as a system of reified cultural values is because of its role as a material component of the Swedish social cosmology (cf. Fehérváry 2012). After decades of almost uninterrupted Social Democratic control of national politics, most Swedes have grown accustomed to viewing the world through a lens of welfare economics, and this has in turn colored beliefs about how social relations are morally required to work. Cosmologies are, in Tambiah's (1985:3) words, "frameworks of concepts and relations which treat the universe or cosmos as an ordered system, describing it in terms of space, time, matter, and motion." While cosmologies are traditionally conceived as *religiously* significant ways for explaining the mechanics of how the wider world works, *secular* cosmologies are a similarly potent means for instantiating the moral order in commonly shared beliefs. A social cosmology allocates positions and clarifies relations among social beings. It provides "common sense," a means for explaining and mapping out how the social universe does and should work, and helps individuals reckon their place in a grander order of things.

In Sweden, a society whose public face is thoroughly secular, the social cosmology (which is decidedly not to say the actual workings of society) treats all people as fundamentally free and fundamentally equal to one

another. At the same time individuals are also obliged to minimize their own negative impact on the world and their peers, and thus their freedom is tempered by an acute awareness of how they and others should and do behave. However, the cosmological view also admits that individuals face potentially intractable problems they are unable to solve through their own means, and thus a corollary to freedom is the ideal that hardship and adversity should and can be managed through channels external to the individual but available to everyone. To that end the Swedish social cosmology places great faith in the "higher power" of the social collective, which, because the cosmology stems from a democratic political system, is represented by a regulatory government—at local, regional, and national levels—charged with enacting the will of the group.

The welfare system, run by the state, is a significant but impersonal means for people to receive external care. Design, too, follows a similar pattern by providing impersonal, external care in everyday life. The ordering of the Swedish social cosmology is symbolically reinforced by the widespread presence of common household goods that perform much of the everyday work of managing mundane hardship. They are not just tools for accomplishing some given task at hand—sitting, sleeping, cutting; they simultaneously become signs used by individuals to enact the spirit of the cosmological attitude and thereby engage in the reproduction of culture. At the same time these objects, never entirely extracted from the final vocabulary even in everyday life, morally skew perceptions of the material world in their use. Symbolic manipulations, and indeed all ideological processes, are concerned at the core with cognition. Inasmuch as animals, as Levi-Strauss (1971:89) asserts, figure so prominently in the cosmologies of traditional societies because they are "good to think," so too does the artifice of the everyday function in the Swedish social cosmology. The extensive existence of objects designed to anticipate and meet the needs of users transforms the exceptionality of such objects into taken-for-granted facts about the way the world *should be* structured and what that structure *should* accomplish.

This is, in a word, a cosmology of modernity that reshapes the natural world to conform to human will. It is the construction of an "artificial nature" populated by citizens, workers, and consumers instead of gods, spirits, and demons. It is divinity replaced by civility, the purposeful ordering

and structuring of the social universe according not to the unknowable whims of a heavenly deity, but to the familiar needs of more worldly beings. Modern nation-states maintain an interest in resculpting the natural world for a number of logistical and economic reasons, one of the most central of which is making populations more "legible" (Scott 1998) and easy to control, and the Swedish state is no exception. In the Swedish social cosmology, after decades of social engineering and social imagineering projects, state ideology, cultural attitudes, and social norms have coalesced to the point that such categories are in practice indistinguishable from one another. Critical in this process has been the cultivation of design as a rational and thoroughly artificial alternative to strict reliance on the natural universe to satisfy all human needs.

Lukács (1968), following Marx, argued that objects acquire a reified "otherness" in the objectification of labor. The temporal flow of the labor process becomes spatialized in the form of objects, which themselves then come to stand in for the very labor processes from which they emerged. In this way objects take on what Lukács calls a "second nature" as not just things-as-they-are, but also as taken-for-granted tokens of human toil. In a similar sense, we might describe the creation and spread of everyday objects crafted in the mold of Swedish design as the reification of the sociopolitical values of the social cosmology, a "second nature," *another* nature that exists alongside the physical reality of the natural world, but is fundamentally rational, controlled, and human—two natures aligned in everyday life. As I have mentioned or discussed at various points in this book, Swedes maintain a deep respect for the natural environment, an affection whose patent fervor rarely goes unremarked in books written by foreigners for general outsider audiences (e.g., Austin 1968). Recycling is a way of life in Sweden, partially mandated by government policy, but also widely advocated as the right thing to do (Isenhour 2010). Skiing, skating, and ice fishing are popular activities during the winter, despite the cold and darkness, and typical summertime events, especially at Midsummer, involve retreating to the countryside—preferably by the ocean or one of the country's countless lakes—to spend time with family and friends. Indeed, both individuals and the social collective preserve intimate connections with the natural world in Sweden, and even design itself, conventionally crafted in wood, steel, glass, and other sustainable materials, tends to interact with

the environment in nondestructive ways. Thus the construction of an artificial "second" nature in Sweden is not aimed at *supplanting* the already given natural world—a common goal, or perhaps by-product, of many state-sponsored modernization projects (see, e.g., Scott 1998; Holston 1989)—but instead at *supplementing* it with a responsible, cooperative system better equipped to handle the social consequences entailed in building a modern society.

Finally, although I have focused in this book on the cultural particulars of Swedish design, I hope that such research has broader implications. Fundamentally, I would like to advocate the position that by examining the *semiotics of material production* we can link up ground-level dynamics of language use to the ideological forces within which materiality helps shape culture. Moreover, as I see it, there are at least three further thematic areas to consider. First, an anthropology of design highlights the contributions to political theater and social life made by designers, a significant but otherwise overlooked group of social agents responsible for manufacturing the set pieces of everyday life. An anthropology of design, focused on how physical worlds and moral orders are meaningfully and purposefully structured, can shed light on how cultural knowledge, values, and norms are consciously put to use in fabricating materials that create, support, and challenge ideologies. Second, an anthropology of design contributes to a general understanding of the relationship between the broad categories of material culture, style, and politics, and how these relate to on-the-ground practices of creation and planning. Finally, an anthropology of design provides an ideal ground both to document the processes by which certain "designed" objects are transformed into "culture," and to refine the conceptual apparatus required for understanding how such processes function more generally.

In designing objects designers are, of course, making *things*, commodities intended to be bought and sold. But they are, with the help of various other social actors and institutions, simultaneously crafting and naturalizing *signs*, constructing an always emergent but nonetheless stable semiotic system with deep significance and resonance in modern Swedish society. I have tried to examine thing-making (the cultural geometry) and meaning-making (the final vocabulary) as interrelated social processes, each with its own dynamics, but whose products possess a unified symbolic

identity in the social world. While language is a crucial semiotic resource for constructing such cultural symbols, it is by no means the only, or even primary one. Like the objects of design themselves, the language of design circulates within, between, and around innumerable symbolic domains and settles in the most obvious and most obscure corners of culture. The challenge, then, is to pull both objects and language out from those corners and place them together, front and center, as one way to understand how they relate both to each other and to the wider sociocultural world.