



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

MEANING IN THE MAKING

– Introducing a Hermeneutic Perspective on the
Contribution of Design Practice
to Innovation

av

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AKADEMISK AVHANDLING

som med tillstånd av Konstnärliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs universitet
för vinnande av filosofie doktorsexamen i ämnet design
framläggs till offentlig granskning

Fredagen den 20 september 2013 kl. 13.00
i aulan, HDK - Högskolan för design och konsthantverk, Kristinelundsgatan
6-8, Göteborg

Fakultetsopponent:
Professor Roberto Verganti, Politecnico di Milano

Abstract

Title: Meaning in the Making: Introducing a hermeneutic perspective on the contribution of design practice to innovation

Language: English

Keywords: design, innovation, design management, hermeneutics, meaning-making, design thinking, design practice

ISBN: 978-91-979993-7-3

In recent years interest has grown in how design can contribute to innovation in business and society, such as through the management concept of design thinking. However, up-close studies on design's contribution to innovation are still scarce. This may be one reason why rhetoric arguing the benefit of design in innovation contexts is often related to pervasive innovation concepts, such as idea generation and problem-solving, rather than to concepts that capture tacit and embodied dimensions of design as an aesthetic practice.

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the contribution of design practice to innovation. This has been achieved through an experimental research-approach in which five designers, through different interventions, involved multi-disciplinary groups of non-designers in experiencing design practice "hands-on" in five "non-designerly" companies. The aim of the interventions was to strengthen the innovativeness of the organizations. The interventions have been studied through ethnographically inspired methods and an interpretative and reflexive methodological approach.

In the interventions established product understandings in the companies were challenged, initially leading to friction. However, the immersion in design hands-on meant that established meaning-spaces were gradually expanded through processes of entwined conversation and hands-on making. In these processes new product understandings were developed through aesthetic deliberation and material practice, which in three cases lead to innovative concepts that could not have been developed within the meaning-space in the organization before the interventions. This study thus sheds light on how the emergence of innovative concepts can be understood as processes of meaning-making, and how design practice may provide processes for such innovation work in multi-disciplinary contexts. It also suggests that when design practice is abstracted away, as is common in design thinking rhetoric, relevant dimensions of design's contribution to innovation may be lost.

The main theoretical contribution is to show the relevance of hermeneutics as an explicit concept for understanding the contribution of design practice to innovation. This can be seen as establishing a missing link between design theory, design management studies and innovation management theory. Beyond articulating the contribution of design practice to innovation, this thesis also supports the relevance of understanding meaning-making as central to innovation.