

Transitioning into Sustainability: Ineke Hans

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On the desire to change the system in which designers operate



Ineke Hans has a theory about why the old design systems aren’t working and talks about how we need to transition into a new system where value and opportunities are created for designers, makers, and society at large.

Interviewing Dutch designer Ineke Hans is a refreshing experience. She talks as much about systems and processes as about products. In fact, Hans is well known for her critical approach as well as her deep interest in anthropological and behavioural issues that are partly related to her “Dutch education and its focus on conceptual design”. In 2015, when she had been living in London for a few years, she started hosting a series of salons focused on issues such as ‘changing production, promotion and selling methods’ and ‘the changing role of the designer’. Since 2017, she has been a professor at the Universität der Künste in Berlin, where she set up a course called ‘Design & Social Context’, which explores “the changes in our society and how designers can move into the future”.

But it wasn’t always this way. When Hans first started out, back in the early 90s, she was working within the system as it was then, because that was all she knew. “Twenty years ago I was trying to find clients and start my own collections,” she recalls. “I would show pieces at fairs, hoping someone would come by and say: let’s produce this and make a lot of money for you.” The irony was that few people were actually making very much money, according to her. “After a while, I realised that the royalties system is totally bankrupt and the pieces that make the company money or those

that designers can live off, are few and far between.” Moreover, Hans was designing furniture for companies who would launch the piece at the Salone del Mobile, and after the fair would just post it on their website and stop pushing or marketing it. Hans was convinced she “might not be that talented” or that her work just didn’t sell. Then she started to understand that this was just the reality of the design business and how it operates.

Hans, who is based between Arnhem (Netherlands) and Berlin, began to take a different route, working for clients with different value systems. One such client is Social Label, an ethical Dutch design brand that creates socio-economic opportunities for disadvantaged and disabled persons in the labour market, through making and design. This year she designed a collection of five timber steps for the label that can be used in multiple ways – from a compact, foldable step ladder to a step that can be used to hang clothes on. “The organisation always connects a designer to a specific workshop, and I was put into a woodworking atelier,” she explains. “The interesting part is that you are not just designing objects to be sold but also designing ‘work’ for the makers.” Social Label is a good example of how design and making could be oriented and set up in a different way. “It’s not focused on just mak-

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ing something new and making a profit out of it; it has totally different values.”

Another project Hans was involved in with very different values was the furniture she designed for Fogo Island Inn in Newfoundland, Canada via the non-profit Shorefast Foundation back in 2011-2013. The remote island had lost most of its fishing industry after the war and the population was shrinking. Of the ones who remained, some had little to no work and were depressed and down on their luck. The idea was to create economic resilience, jobs and opportunities for the local community through a new hotel and various related making and hospitality projects. For the collection, Hans collaborated with local boat builders and craftspeople on several pieces of furniture, including an indoor rocker and Windsor bench, daubed in the same bright colours of the island’s famous clapboard houses. “I spoke to women whose husbands were totally ‘different people’ since they became involved in the project,” she says. What’s more, the workshops on the island are still producing these and other furniture pieces for sale via their online shop, and the project has expanded to other areas too. “That gives me, as a designer, the feeling that I am creating impact. Much more than when I do something with a big company or brand.”

The way Hans feels about the design industry and how she chooses to work has changed, but so have the mores and habits of the society around us, she explains. “People nowadays work on their laptop during their commute to work; their offices are smaller because space is so expensive, or they work at home, which has a huge impact on furniture and office design. It also means that we buy things differently and that I have to design a three-seater sofa that can fit through your doorway, because people are buying their sofas online now.”

By the same token, people no longer buy full sets of cutlery and tableware when they get married or live together, they often can’t afford to buy a home (or the home they live in is smaller than that of the previous generation), and they don’t buy a car because they “would just be stuck in traffic”. The design industry has not managed to keep up with these societal changes and system shifts. But it’s not so much that design companies aren’t willing to try and keep up, it’s that often they don’t even know where to start, says Hans. “Some companies have a lot of staff and transitions mean change and things having to be reorganised, and that is sometimes very difficult,” she says. “Sticking too long to the old ways can make it harder and harder.”

A recent product by Ineke Hans shows another potential avenue that eschews the ‘old ways’. REX is a chair made of recycled plastic that was based on an earlier design of hers that never went into production. In the end, a new Dutch company called Circuform manufactured it in 2021 out of recycled plastic made from waste that would otherwise have been incinerated, such as fishing nets and old carpets. What made the project truly pioneering, however, was the fact that it was the first Dutch deposit chair, meaning that it can be returned to

the company for a small refund and then repaired and resold or shredded into its raw material components. Though the deposit concept is new, Hans was an early adopter of the use of recycled plastics. “I started using recycled plastic back in 1996-97, and even though now

it sounds like you’re greenwashing when you say you use recycled plastic, there is so much plastic on the planet that we should be using it as a resource.” A shocking statistic she read a few years ago makes that point even more clearly. “Apparently, 56 per cent of the plastic

we have produced since 1862 was made after the year 2000.”

During our conversation Hans says she can hear herself speaking about money and business models more than she expected, but it’s not that surprising given that one of the big

problems with the design industry is how companies and designers make money. “I’m convinced that of the furniture companies around now, only a third will be left in ten years’ time,” she says at one point. “I think a lot of them will go bankrupt.” A trip to the Milan Sa-

lone earlier this year did nothing to dispel the gloomy notion that the industry is paralysed and unable to adapt. “The city was full of TikTok queues and it felt more like a fashion week than a product design week,” she says. More pertinently and dramatically, however, it has also become very expensive to show in Milan as a young designer, or find anything close to affordable lodgings for the week.

“What we need is a transition into a more sound and sustainable system, one that values the processes and systems behind-the-scenes and creates value or opportunities for people.” None of this means mass production has to become a dirty word, she says, because with so many people on our planet, mass production “is key to keeping the cost of things cheaper for them”. The handmade is often romanticised but many people can’t afford it. “We have to find clever solutions instead,” she adds. And not be afraid of failure or of trying different things with no guaranteed result in mind.

Hans tells a story about how she once visited a maze with a large group of people. While everyone made a beeline for the centre of the maze and the tower that was its designated endpoint, she wandered along all the paths and was the last one to climb the tower. “I saw the whole maze and I was happy about that!” It’s this fascination with the journey that propels Hans and keeps her curious and motivated. It’s also why her design thinking and work – in all its forms – feels so relevant to how we live now. <

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