

## 'Ikea sofas are like H&M trousers': the potential of sensuous signs

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### **Abstract**

What makes Ikea sofas similar to H&M trousers? Clothing and furniture retail are increasingly aligned, as both follow fashion trends and seasonal change. Because of the transience that shifting trends imply, clothing is often read as a signifier of superficial or frivolous expression, masking more important realities that lie elsewhere. In this article, I follow Webb Keane in asserting that when treating clothing as a sign of surface adornment, as a mere communicator of meaning, one not only dematerialises the sign but foregrounds meaning over action. In focusing on the sensuous qualities of signs (qualisigns), I view Ikea goods as sites of potential and compare how adorned surfaces are more than semiotic vehicles, but also material things that have effects.

### **Keywords**

Ikea, H&M, qualisigns, material culture, furniture, fashion

**Page 1 of 18**

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## Introduction

What makes Ikea sofas similar to H&M trousers? Alliances between clothing and furniture retail are increasingly evident on many Euro-American high streets, as clothing and furniture retailers exhibit a heightened acknowledgement of fashion trends and the promotion of seasonal change in their wares. Leslie and Reimer (2003) note that the boundaries between fashion and furniture are frequently blurred. Current fashion magazines (such as *Elle Home* magazine and the Swedish edition of *Elle*) feature home furnishing, while high-street stores in metropolitan centres combine different kinds of products that ripple from body to home styling (H&M Home, Zara Home, Laura Ashley). Furniture retailers, meanwhile, market their wares with one eye on up-and-coming fashion trends. Magazines launched in the 1990s (such as *Wallpaper* and *Living*) promote home furnishings in addition to clothes and leisure features (ibid: 428).

Seasonal fashions now characterise furniture retail in ways that were unprecedented for much of the twentieth century, and 'lifestyle' or 'lifestyle-retailing' gives a name to this contemporary trend. Furthermore, Leslie and Reimer suggest that Ikea – the global furniture retailer – is a harbinger in this retail trend because it is explicitly lifestyle-oriented and promotes a vision of furniture as disposable (see Reimer and Leslie 2003: 434; Wickman 1994). This acceleration of furniture production and consumption in keeping with seasonal fashions is relatively recent, however. For much of the twentieth century, furniture shopping was relatively infrequent (Attfield 2000, in Leslie and Reimer 2003: 430). Even by the turn of the millennium, Ikea's North American market research found that the average householder changed furniture only one and a half times over a lifetime (Coppola 2002, in Leslie and Reimer ibid.). In recent decades, however, this situation has intensified in Europe and North America with a dramatic increase in the turnover of the furniture trade, a shift Leslie and Reimer call the 'Ikea era' (ibid: 436). Ikea, therefore, is accorded particular prominence in marking this shift from longevity to comparative transience in line with the fashioning of furniture.

This article is concerned with cross-overs between furniture and fashion as they emerged in discussions with research respondents during my ethnographic fieldwork in Stockholm in 2008.<sup>1</sup> On many occasions it struck me as odd that individuals made direct comparisons between Ikea furniture and H&M clothing and described them as similar. H&M is a low-

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<sup>1</sup> During that year I followed the furniture from the Ikea flagship store in Kungens Kurva in southern Stockholm and interviewed 48 householders in their homes. In addition, I visited key members of the Ikea management in service offices in Stockholm, Helsingborg and Älmhult, and conducted several follow-up interviews in 2010. I would like to acknowledge the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Swedish Institute for funding this research.

cost provider of fashionable clothing for men, women and children, associated with inexpensive youthful wares than may be commonly recognised on the streets of Stockholm. It is seen as offering an affordable and generally reliable standard, albeit one that is lacking in exclusivity. Moreover, H&M is identifiably Swedish and has prospered during rapid economic prosperity in general in post-war Sweden. Both retailers are viewed by the bulk of my research participants as highly successful internationally, with a similar youthful consumer body attracted by its low-cost sales pitch, but fairly reliable trendy design.

My aim here is to consider those situations, practices or material qualities that must be foregrounded for Ikea goods and H&M clothing to be seen as 'the same'. Taking case studies of householders such as Anna, Juan, and Ursula, I firstly explore how my informants juxtaposed H&M fashion and Ikea retail before suggesting that the potential of 'light' goods holds specific interest for them. 'Lightness' is described as an attribute of many things, and is not fixed as a single essential quality. Similarly, lightness for my respondents implies a variety of affective qualities and material arrangements, but in these case-studies the value of freedom and mobility is particularly stressed. Secondly, I illustrate how colours, textures, and the glossiness of Ikea merchandise forge attachments, as well as distinctions, between individuals and households as well as within or among them. Lastly, I make the argument that research respondents' emphasis on mobility and the ephemeral does not merely denote shifts in fashion ranges but is employed to respond to a more relational sense of permanence. That is, Ikea merchandise lends itself to a realisation of one's own plans as being either long-term or brief. As such the inordinate emphasis on the planned obsolescence of furniture ranges masks additional ways in which householders do, or do not, use Ikea furniture to mark a sense of fixity in their own lives. In these examples Ikea goods are sites of potential.

### **Goods as Sites of Potential**

The approach that I here adopt stems from dual theoretical advances in consumption and material culture studies. The first acknowledges that domestic possessions are far from finished forms when produced or acquired. They evolve and change with affective routines and practices. Goods have physical, as much as social or economic, lives (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe 2009: 250). The second challenges the reading of consumer goods as semiotic vehicles of corporate brands to the neglect of their material properties. In these respects, I do not intend to consider the very different domains of clothing and domestic goods through an investigation of corporate strategy and branding; nor will I focus on the restructuring of the furniture and fashion industries. That has been done before (cf. Leslie and Reimer 2003 for an excellent account).

Commodities lend themselves to semiotic reading (Baudrillard

1988). Items of dress, in particular, often transmute into visual shorthands of the consumer age, or become symbols of discrete constituencies, minorities or sub-cultures (Tarlo 2010). When labelled 'fashion', clothing in all its complexity and sensuousness can quickly distil into critiques of superficiality icons (cf. Miller 2010). Similarly, Ikea products are often described as semiotically charged, in that they encode essentially benign democratic messages which are apprehended by a somewhat passive consumer audience (Lindqvist 2009). But, in privileging the disembodied abstract sign, we remove bodily engagement from analytical sight, and thereby assume the role of 'flaneurs and tourists': '...we are not in the world, we are only looking or gazing at it' (Löfgren 1997:102-103, in Olsen 2003:97). Unsurprisingly, recent anthropological scholarship asks if we really should continue to neglect the brute materiality of these things that we literally carry on our backs, or the sensuous quality of domestic possessions that provide bodily comfort (Hansen 2004, Keane 2005, Küchler and Were 2005, Miller 2010, Miller and Woodward 2012, Turner 2007, Wigley 2001). Instead of asking 'what does clothing signify', we should posit, following Webb Keane (2005:6): 'what does it make possible?'

In a series of works, Keane (2003, 2005) has argued cogently that the point is not to discount signs, but to recognise their various material qualities as latent, and as harbouring a potential for mobilisation. The relationship between sign and object can be iconic (based on resemblance), indexical (based on a causal link), or symbolic (as in arbitrary social convention) (Keane 2003: 413), but Keane specifically critiques a level of abstraction entailed in the assumption that signs reference meaning that lies elsewhere. Apprehending clothing as a sign, he contends, involves the realisation that clothing imparts more than 'meaning'; it is active in processes of revelation and concealment – its very properties intervene in causal relationships (2005: 6). Neglecting the actual and diverse properties of any sign consequently entails discounting how specific qualities and material practices intercede in their interpretation. As an alternative, Keane asserts that the qualities of sensuous things operate as potential signs (qualisigns) depending on how those qualities are foregrounded. A qualisign, therefore, refers to a quality that operates as a sign, but these qualities are more sites of discovery and elaboration than the result of immutable fixed material properties. Signs in themselves 'assert nothing'; their semiotic potential must be activated or regimented, and one potential meaning may be realised while another is masked (Keane 2003: 418-9). As such signs are sites of unrealised potential, their specific values must be activated in line with the physical attributes on an on-going basis. Similarly, specific properties such as colour are 'bundled' in any object with others like form, and these can be variously privileged and mobilised or downplayed, ignored and neglected. Within consumer practice these material properties not only provide significant motivation in the purchase, consumption, use, affect and

disposal of goods; they are also central to their design, production and presentation.

For example, within Ikea stores furniture ranges could be read in semiotic terms as signifying specific styles that are broadly homologous with discrete constituencies of consumers. Showrooms can be distinguished by displaying one of four style groupings: Modern, Country, Scandinavian and Young Swede. These styles are reproduced in global Ikea stores, although managers in each outlet make some adjustments to cater for the preferences ('lifestyles') of local consumers. Varied material properties adhere to any single object, and so the style group to which a piece is attributed can alter depending on how these properties interact: the colour of wood, the glossiness of the fabrics, the coarseness of textiles, and the colours or contrasts employed. Specifically, each stylistic theme has a series of colours and textures linked to it, so that Modern, for example, is identified by a high gloss paint, bold contrasting colours on soft furnishings, and specific wood hues. Bright colours – such as green, blue, red, white, and black – also signify Modern, as do contrasting graphics and occasionally single dominant colours. But variations on Modern (Modern-White) also imply textures and more discrete qualities – such as a play of light on surfaces, a dominating white complemented by textures provided by plastic, metal, glass and natural fibres. Being able to distinguish a series of colours, textures, sheen and contrasts from basic forms allows Ikea managers to use the same basic item of furniture to fit a series of stylistic themes.<sup>2</sup>

Realizing potential is not within the capacity of the object alone. Designating furniture themes takes place within Ikea backstage offices as stylistic content is there ascribed to a series of qualities to do with colour and form. Behind each designation is a host of dedicated Ikea research, but certain material qualities (for example, glossiness or modular shape) also derive from a long history of international architectural and furniture design. Connections – either based on physical resemblance or on causal relations – must be forged and judged, and resemblances between things – such as a bright white Billy bookcase for the Young Swede, or dark woods for the Scandinavian style – are not automatic. Rather, they are based on a series of perceived similarities that make sense over time, and do change. Some shapes – like the Ektor sofa range with its rounded arms – is immutably Country style, whereas others, like the Bestal storage units, can be adapted to either Modern or Scandinavian styles. As with the current emphasis on practice within consumption studies, this implies that the meaning of any product is not fixed, nor wholly authored by corporate policy. Rather, it is emergent.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, Per Lundgren, Ikea manager for interior decoration in Kungens Kurva, 2008.

### **Anna**

Anna is an event organiser and mother-of-one in her twenties, and agreed to meet me when she heard that I was researching Ikea consumption. She has long black hair and wore it with a rather severe straight fringe that gave off the impression of a dramatic and fashion-savvy individual. On the evening we met she was dressed in a white top and black layered mini-skirt, which struck me as slightly unusual for late autumn in Sweden. Before I arrived, Anna and her husband had just bought a holiday cottage in Southern Sweden on the website Blocket. 'We haven't even visited the cabin', she told me 'which is crazy,' she laughed. Both of them work full-time and have a toddler daughter, but they were, nevertheless, in clear command of an immaculate apartment, decorated in muted browns, off whites and beige. Anna even found time to bake a cake before my arrival.

As I gazed around the room Anna told me that virtually all the furniture in her home was from Ikea – 'We love Ikea, so bring it on!' She announced almost immediately on my arrival. Instantly recognisable was the children's activity area that occupied a corner of the living room: a little blackboard and chair, with a corresponding table with crayons and chalk stacked tidily in small bundles. As we chatted, she continually returned to fashion and clothing to make her point.

"Yeah, Ikea furniture is a statement like clothes, like everything absolutely. Today you use it like a pair of trousers; you change it all the time. Yeah, absolutely...they (Ikea) are very trendy. You can buy things that are cheap but still very trendy. Like H&M. Those two are the best brands, and cheapest. Young people when they get their first home, they go to Ikea ... In the beginning everything is from Ikea. Then you get a bit bored of that. My parents go to [competitor] instead because they think it is more quality. Also you recognise things from Ikea, so it tends to be younger people [who shop there]. If you want to belong to another group of high...what do you call it...high income people you go somewhere else."

Anna claims to be one of Ikea's 'biggest fans'. When I asked her what she and her husband had purchased from the store, she gazed around the room for a short time, finally lifting up the mugs sitting on the coffee table in front of us: 'These are probably the only things not purchased in Ikea,' she said at last, 'And the mat in the kitchen'. She quickly followed this observation with the comment 'which is terrible, I know'. Even the art, she added, is 'quite good, they get artists to do their art'. Everything else – the colour schemes and furnishings, the storage units and the child activity corner – was composed, organized, advised and designed by a

professional designer, employed by Ikea whom they consulted at length. Anna is very happy with the result; the designer was 'brilliant', and everything in the room has been carefully matched. Because of this professional input, however, she herself is unclear about why the room is arranged quite as it is. For example, when I ask why the sofa is placed just a little distance from the wall, she tells me that it is for 'designery' reasons.

The professional assistance sourced in Ikea was sought when the couple purchased the apartment, and they followed the interior decorator's directions to the letter. Anna is unabashed in her enthusiasm for Ikea furnishings and proud of the corporation she tells me. Nevertheless, there is an awareness on her part that such avid adoption of Ikea wares without her own personal input could transgress my expectations of how one ought to decorate and inhabit one's home. At the time of fieldwork there was heavy emphasis on DIY and flea-markets among my research respondents who talked at length of homes that look effortlessly stylish, personal and even occasionally themed. It is perhaps for this reason that Anna describes as 'terrible' that she adopted the Ikea designer's suggestions wholesale. 'Why terrible' I ask? She responds: 'Because you shouldn't live the brand, you know'. Ikea merchandise might be directed to thrifty and youthful households but Anna is keenly aware of underlying commercial interests and compelling marketing techniques- 'they're good at it' she added laughing. In the allure of fashionable and accessible commodities, comes the caution not to lose oneself.

I had encountered this sentiment elsewhere. While the majority of my informants told me that, while having bought something from Ikea was ubiquitous and generally an endorsement of the brand, an excessive presence of Ikea merchandise might suggest encompassment by the brand, so that one's 'real' personality was obliterated or obfuscated. Indeed, and in stark defiance of the numerous interior magazines (*Elle Interiör* and *Shöna Hem*) that provide professional mandates on 'good taste', the most frequent answer given to my questions concerning 'bad taste' referred to immaculate homes executed by designers but lacking individual expression. The consequent negotiation over what constituted the optimum proportion of Ikea goods was not unlike those posed by deliberations in H&M. Both retailers are popular sources for everyday provisioning in Stockholm and their goods are easily identifiable as functional and fashionable wares. Both Ikea and H&M were described to me as typically 'Svensson', an idiom equivalent to 'the average Joe', and comparisons between both retailers are commonly made in national and international media.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, occasional broadsheet media stories cover how Ikea and H&M collaborate in corporate ventures. Swedish newspapers occasionally run stories about Ikea and H&M globally (e.g. '*Hennes & Mauritz satser i Japan. Ikea kommer*

But for Anna, Ikea furniture is appealing precisely because of its veneer surfaces and lack of weighty mass, which indexes thrift and youthfulness but also manifests future aspiration. During our conversation she points to the fundamental lightness of the Ikea particle board. She describes it as less 'material' than real wood, less valuable, less likely to stand the test of time. More easily acquired, more obviously designed than its competitors, but more likely to fall out of favour as her taste evolves. It can be lifted and carried, and easily changed. Sitting at her coffee table, she taps it tellingly. She lifts it with her index finger to illustrate to me that it lacks density. It looks good, she reiterates, but there is no real wood inside. In fact, particle board can be quite heavy I later discover, but nonetheless for Anna Ikea merchandise lacks a certain solidity that real wood carries. 'Cheap stuff you know, everything from Ikea is very light. No weight'.

If particle board indexes weightlessness for Anna, it does so because its surfaces can be easily changed, cleaned and adapted to fit her purpose. She can purchase new cushion and sofa covers from the store or from spin-off concerns. One company called Bemz specializes in making striking, unusual, or designer covers for Ikea sofas. These covers are not necessarily thrifty and can cost more than the actual sofa, but they have been highly successful in Stockholm. On the Bemz website one can read about the CEO, a Canadian woman, Lesley Pennington: '...having bought into the idea of a swedish [sic] lifestyle, of course she went to IKEA to find fundamental pieces for her new home'. The website continues that she then realized the potential of Ikea sofas to be dressed in unique styles.

For Anna, implied ephemerality not only refers to the obsolescence of a particular product range, but also just as much to the transience in her life. She refers to her living room furnishings as holding-spaces for future action. The chair I was seated on was a stop-gap, she told me, until she could afford the one she really wanted. And while there was no immediate intention to purchase this other item, the Ikea stand-in marked a transitional space in the living room. It didn't have to actually change, or at least not at any time soon. Anna foregrounds this transitional quality as 'light - no weight' to designate a social and material property made manifest in particle board. Her chair marked the

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*med tipsene*'. *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 April, 2007; 'Jubel på H&M och Ikea efter unik dom i Delhi'. *DagensPS*, 28 November, 2011). Equally, on the web one might read of comparisons between both companies. For example: 'The idea of providing such garments for the average woman fitted in well with the egalitarian mood of post-war Sweden', noted *Financial Times* writer, Nicholas George, who wrote that the Scandinavian country's thriving economy helped make it rise quickly to the list of the world's most affluent nations. 'It is often said that if Per-Albin Hansson, the legendary Social Democratic leader, created Sweden's "people's home" with welfare and security, Ingvar Kamprad, founder of Ikea, furnished it and Erling Persson [founder of H&M] clothed it.' <http://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2004-Ko-Pr/Persson-Stefan.html>



possibility of change.

### **Juan and Ursula**

Juan and Ursula were 45 and 37 years old respectively when we met. The couple approached me in Ikea one sunny day as I was distributing leaflets, and we arranged to talk at their home later that week. Juan is from Venezuela originally, although he has lived many years in the United States and Europe, moving between California, Paris and Sweden while cohabiting with his Swedish wife, Ursula and their six-year old daughter, Åsa. Juan worked as the European manager for a French company in one of Stockholm's suburbs, a position that contributed to the family's recent relocations. Ursula worked as a head waitress in a restaurant in the city. When we met they were based in a charming nineteenth century apartment block in central Stockholm, with high ceilings and striking stained glass windows. The apartment was one of two on their floor and serviced by an old lift with a cage door that pulled across the entrance, but was slightly small for their needs. When I arrived Juan was hovering on the landing, sharing various medicines with a neighbour. He complained at length about the difficulty of buying medicines over the counter in Sweden and about how he had to rely on his frequent trips abroad to stock up on packets of pain relievers. As we talked, the possibility of a further relocation was mentioned several times. Moreover, the impression of mobility was enhanced by Juan and Ursula pointedly speaking English to me on each occasion we met, and by Juan's insistence that he had no interest in learning Swedish: 'There's no need; everyone speaks English', he said.

Juan and Ursula clearly rely on Ikea merchandise as part of a mobile lifestyle, but also view their visits to the store in social terms. The couple visits the Ikea store in Kungens Kurva approximately every six weeks and views them as a social occasion. Juan also eats in an Ikea outlet near his work with colleagues, while the couple might spend several hours on a visit. In the past they have struck up acquaintances in the store, and in Paris one of their closest friendships was made when Juan starting chatting to a Spaniard wearing a Barcelona University top. In addition to their lively interaction with other people in the store, Juan pays close attention to the goods on sale: 'I like to start at the top and work my way down through every showroom to make sure I don't miss anything'. On the first occasion we met they had driven from the city 'on a mission' to purchase scented candles, which Ursula confesses she won't buy anywhere else.

The couple has moved several times over the past decade. They first cohabited in California and later moved to Paris where they settled for two years. After that they transferred to Stockholm where they had already relocated once since their arrival. In all their previously shared homes, they had relied exclusively on Ikea merchandise to furnish their

homes, opting for a 'Scandinavian look'. This aesthetic was particularly marked in the US where Ursula's friends commented on the Swedish style, devoid of heavy furniture and rustic themes that were more in keeping with her American peers. In their present apartment, Ursula said:

"Pretty much the same in all three houses. This sofa, we bought the same one in all three homes. The dressers in the bedroom, those are the third group in the same style. I like it that way. Otherwise I'd buy something else. Yeah, I think we buy the same thing. I follow Ikea pretty much everywhere I go. In Paris and in California the Scandinavian style is cleaner, it looked more like I felt. The modern style in Paris is very close to the Scandinavian style – naked, simple – but it looks more expensive somehow... With Ikea you can have a Scandinavian look, because the designers are Scandinavian. It looked... more how I felt. I don't like that heavy look, heavy tables."

For Juan shopping in Ikea is a leisure and social activity, but for Ursula the desire to taste and feel something identifiably Swedish became more pronounced when she gave birth to Åsa.

"When we lived in California, you have no idea how hard it was to be a European in America, especially in California, and when I went to Ikea it was like I was coming home. Åsa was one year old when we were there and I would drive quite a long way to get to Ikea just to get those cookies. Because I wanted her to have those cookies..."

Providing Åsa with Swedish food was part of a broader theme for Ursula in which she discussed Ikea merchandise in terms of feelings of homesickness being ameliorated through tastes of home, especially in the socialization of her daughter. At the same time, the satisfaction she felt not only accrued through eating specific food, but by acquiring a 'light', simple aesthetic that looked Scandinavian, one that was characterized by clean surfaces and blond woods. As we talk, she uses the term 'clean', but acknowledges that in Swedish she would say 'naked' or 'simple' (*naken, lite enklare*). The uncluttered aesthetic of clear bright surfaces is fundamentally Swedish, she tells me. Unlike the retailer's exhortation to constantly change styles, this family has replicated its preferred look in three homes in three countries over five years.

"You don't ship Ikea stuff, but this is insane. As I said to my mum, I've bought Ikea stuff for three homes in five years. It's crazy and it's really bad, and if you put that money together you can buy something you really like. With the same money you could have bought really nice stuff. We bought the same futon in each of the homes. The dressers in the bedroom – that is the third lot in three homes. But I like that. I keep replacing it. We buy the same things. I don't know why."

Scandinavian design of the mid-twentieth century traditionally railed against elaborate ornament, and the style whence it originated –

modernism – remains the primary inspiration behind current Ikea design.<sup>4</sup> Modernist design was built on a perceived convergence of surface ornamentation and social pretense, and the mission of many of its proponents was to provide clear, unencumbered surfaces and 'honest' architecture (Widenheim 2002). In the Nordic countries, the extremes of modernism were largely avoided through the adoption of natural woods and less angular furniture forms. And while this style is constantly evolving in line with adaptations by Ikea designers, there is still a pronounced espousal of clear surfaces and good storage as beneficial to domestic harmony and efficiency. In 2008, in-store Ikea posters proclaimed that personal possessions require good storage.

In California, France, and to a degree in Sweden, the pared-down look of Ikea Modern or Scandinavian style was a manifestation of the Swedish aesthetic for Ursula, and one that is demonstrated in clear, glossy surfaces by professional couples such as herself. Additionally, Ursula is familiar with Ikea's reputation for reliability and thrift over long-term quality, and opts for this when making multiple purchases of the same items over several years. However, clothing becomes a dominant metaphor when we discuss their situation in Stockholm.

"When you live in Sweden you have to understand pretty much everyone wears the same thing and has their apartment in the same way. You go out and ten other people have the same jeans because they shop in H&M...wearing the same blouse. In every household you'll find something. That's the way it is me for who grew up here. Now it is Canadian goose jackets, and almost everyone is investing in a jacket like that. In the US there is more choice, and you don't see the same things. My parents are like that, traveling to the same places. Swedes go to Thailand, and suddenly everyone has to go to the same place – like the French go to Morocco, I guess. Younger people are better now, but still Ikea is safe. If you buy a sofa from Ikea, it is still acceptable."

Transience is more a juncture than a permanent state, and it is at such junctures, I was told, that individuals visit Ikea more. Juan and Ursula are not particularly young and do not fit the stereotype of 'typical Ikea consumers' to which many respondents referred. Their aesthetic preferences have not altered through a series of relocations, but they also recognise that their constant reliance on Ikea to fill the gaps requires more subtle management. On the couple's return to Stockholm, they replicated the same choices as in France and the United States, but are considering a further move within the city and express their doubts as to whether they will rely on Ikea entirely for the next move.

Comparisons between H&M and Ikea go further than merely

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<sup>4</sup> Personal communication, Range Strategist Lea Kumpulainen, Ikea Älmhult Offices, Sweden.

signifying thrift or fashion. Both Anna and Ursula's employment of 'light' Ikea furniture can be placed within a perspective that is somewhat conflictual. The comparison of her Ikea chair with H&M trousers allows Anna to reflect upon a series of qualities that she associates with mobility and ephemerality, which for her, is almost entirely positive. 'Light' signifies an absence of solidity that could imply serious content and real matter, but could equally be read as thrifty, mainstream, or simply as a lack of concerted effort on her part. Apparel that adorns bodies and indexes a certain ephemerality may be conceptually transferred to the subjects that are adorned. It is with reference to this transnaturing capacity (Jones and Stallybrass 2000: 4) that Anna refers to 'living the brand', recognising that her efforts might be read in terms of a decorative flourish, a pleasing gloss on something that holds a much greater solidity in its nakedness. As a play on surface, living the brand implies that she lacks enough weight within herself to counter a potential reading of superficiality.

Fashion in this sense assumes a more dynamic character. As Molotch (1996: 252, in Leslie and Reimer 2003: 434) reminds us, 'furniture becomes an extension of the body, a vehicle for self-display and comportment'. With clothing, as with furniture, one must navigate a social and personal world that meets on the contours of the body; one must negotiate the correct proportions to find the balance between modesty and ostentation. Specific forms of apparel not only present novel ways of expressing modesty, but actually make it possible (Keane 2005). With clothing and intimate goods, one must attend to comfort and discomfort – which is both a corporeal and social quality (Miller and Woodward 2012). Being comfortable refers not only to physical senses, but implies a quality in ensuring that those around one are at ease.

Finally, and significantly, here one must attend to affordances and potential: what is made possible by the specific material qualities of apparel – by colour, texture and form? What this implies, Miller argues, is that the surface of the body can be the site for self-realization, rather than a distraction from it. He refers to 'depth ontology' (2010:16) to designate – and challenge – the pervasive idea that the 'real' person is located somewhere inside, while clothing acts to obfuscate that invisible humanity. In this respect, Hartman contends that Ikea merchandise lends itself to hyper semiotic manipulation in embedding the person '...into the realm of pure theatre and high camp...' (2007:484), rendering the real person opaque. Ikea merchandise, he suggests, provides a camouflage to all who wish to appear other than they really are. With the correct tableaux one can seem to have skills that are actually absent.

Alternatively but concomitantly, the same quality of weightlessness indexes a lack of fixity which Anna experiences as freedom. Similarly, in underscoring the perception that Ikea furniture is a type of H&M clothing, Ursula elects to valorise its mainstream normative quality, whilst

simultaneously aware of the fact that a subtle balance must be drawn. What is markedly Swedish in California is conceived in different terms in Stockholm, where ubiquity and impressions of normative domesticity are more keenly felt. 'Furniture everyone can afford' is deemed largely positive, but requires skilled management. The very ubiquity of Ikea merchandise provides the instigation for Ursula to domesticate the otherwise pervasive into something singular.

### **Lightness as a Sensuous Quality**

It is clear that uncluttered worktops, tables and muted fabrics represent the Swedish style for Ursula, but what she terms 'light' or 'heavy' as aesthetic qualities are semiotically polysemous and manifested in diverse material forms. Light woods, for example, were often described to me by research participants as indexical of the Scandinavian aesthetic, along with clean lines, simple furnishings, uncluttered surfaces, unimpeded daylight, and airy environments. Often, this vision of the Scandinavian aesthetic was explicitly opposed to ornate elaborate furniture styles. The earliest Ikea catalogues from the 1950s show a rapid transition from heavily draped interiors with ornate suites called 'The Oxford' to drawings of sparse, minimal living rooms with large open windows providing the backdrop for the 'Camping' range. The focus on changes in furniture is common, but the transition to light-filled rooms is equally impressive. This was part of a pan-European trend that extolled modernist design and marked the Scandinavian aesthetic internationally. Even earlier in the twentieth century, the German-born architect, Mies van der Rohe, used light to challenge traditional expectations of interiority and space through reflections refracted off glass and polished marble (Bille and Sørensen 2007).

Lightness can refer to sheen, weight, colour, form, degree of ornamentation or even the absence of objects. White walls inspire feelings of emptiness and maximises space in small apartments I was told, but the necessity of light walls and floors was described for reasons that extended far beyond the functional. One student, Linda (aged 25) explained the necessity of white walls with reference to the weather 'we have such empty landscape for much of the year, so we need it light inside', while another woman Kerstin (65 year-old retired school teacher) explained how patterned wall-paper gives her headaches. Respondents of all ages reiterated Kerstin's discomfort surrounding both disordered possessions as clutter, but also patterns on walls or floors as an infringement to personal happiness and domestic well-being. Ursula refers to American rustic themes as heavy, but others referred to perceptions of English chintz fabric sofas or draped curtains in similar terms. One engineer and father-of-two Mohammad (aged 35) had recently moved into a new house in a southern Stockholm suburb and told me 'we want to enjoy the emptiness. For every new thing that comes into this

house we will remove something’.

Other research respondents describe lightness as a feeling, created through clean or simple domestic environments. In interviews conducted through English, some research respondents would refer to ‘clean lines’, but many also clarified the fact that the English word ‘clean’ might be misleading. Ann, a 45-year old lawyer and mother-of-two, commented: ‘it is more about the simplicity of the clear surface than clean in a hygienic sense... It doesn’t have to be clean, but it has to be possible to clean’. For Ann, having uncluttered shelving and uncarpeted floors implied a feeling of lightness because it exhibited a potential for cleaning, without necessarily being clean at any one time.

Finally, lightness implies the actual quality of luminescence. ‘We decorate with light’, a Swedish designer told me during a visit to the Ikea head office in Älmhult. ‘The Norwegians spend most on lights’, she continued, ‘but then it is us’. She showed me the children’s lamp she had designed: a bright green insect. When she switched it on, I suddenly saw what I had never noticed before: the insect’s legs were evident in the play of light and shadow, and not as plastic extensions to the lamp. Respondents’ homes tend to use multiple sources of electric light instead of a single central source, and as a result light collects in corners or refracts off high-gloss surfaces. Light shines from domestic interfaces such as windows, and illuminates public spaces in Stockholm’s winter months. Decorated Christmas light fixtures may remain on apartment windows or balconies well into spring, while candles are ubiquitous in informants’ households and used to create a feeling of intimacy.

For my informants, then, the quality of light may refer to a series of disaggregated qualities: luminescence, an absence of colour or pattern, a type of wood – such as birch – or the form that wood takes: not too carved, or decorated. One way to understand the quality of lightness is to return to Webb Keane’s analysis of how certain sensuous qualities of objects can come to have a privileged role. Objects may operate as signs, but only as embedded in physical worlds with practical capacities and active sentient individuals. Specifically relevant here is Nancy Munn’s development of the *qualisign* to refer to sensuous qualities that pertain to a variety of objects (1986). These qualities may be found in highly diverse settings, but because they participate in a larger system of values, they are recognised as essentially similar (Keane 2003: 415). Recognising anything as the same must depend on conventional foregrounding of some features over others. In this example, a wall may be described as light, but only if one recognises and privileges the white colour of the paint over the heaviness of the plaster. Similarly, the lightness of birch might be stressed in a celebration of its colour and form, but only to neglect the dead weight of the table. The sensation of a light home, identified through insubstantial surfaces or specific configurations of surface and colours, is here expounded by both households, who pitch it

as oppositional to a substantial heaviness that impedes domestic mobility. The co-mingling of colour and surface is equally tied to visions of a Scandinavian aesthetic by Ursula, envisioned as forming a backbone of Swedish domesticity, despite challenges to this vision as a myth (Ahl and Olsson 2002, see also Widar and Wickman 2003). Lightness must be manifested, but in the process of being realised it is inescapably bound to – or bundled with – other physical qualities (paint, particle board, or birch or pine wood). Lightness is immediate and emotive, but not exhausted by any specific property. In Ikea these processes evolve and change as they move from in-store showroom to household floor, but there are always other processes, other material qualities, and other agents involved that influence or dictate the specific qualities attributed to clothing and to furnishings.

This argument destabilises any separation of signs as meaningful, without equal attention to their material manifestation. How we understand, interact with, and comprehend objects relates to those properties that are deemed salient. Not only, therefore, are signs situated within a world of action and consequences, and subject to other mediating practices (Keane 2005: 8), but the social significance of any sign is open to the vicissitudes of convention, challenge, or change. As we see with lightness, meaning is not free-floating, but is manifested in material things which bind it to other qualities. Moreover, the social significance of these other qualities is not fixed. Finally, Keane points out that the qualities of things equally enter into our subjectivity and retain a phenomenological character (Keane 2003: 418). We embody the characteristics of different things and can read diverse intentions into signs. In attending to the sensuous qualities of things and differentiating them from isolated objects, we convert '...discrete moments of experience into an overarching value system on the basis of habits and intuitions rather than rules and cognition' (Keane 2003: 415).

In closing then, the following points have emerged. With the alliance of interior furnishing and fashion in retail comes the popular framing of furniture as emblem of identity, as immaterial meanings, as a sign of inner personality, or as an obfuscation thereof. Fashion has evolved into a key arena through which we identify shifting styles, a frenetic play on surface and superficiality (Jones and Stallybrass 2010:1-2). Furniture retail, therefore, potentially follows fashion as a sign of ephemerality, a cover for something more truthful when unmasked. Because of its presumed disposability, Ikea potentially lends itself to semiotic interpretation in these terms. However, anthropologists have long been aware that clothing is central in making the person's true self manifest. Keane (2003, 2005), Miller (2010), and others (Küchler and Were 2005, Jones and Stallybrass 2000) have challenged the pervasive assumption that clothing – or any surface adornment – is significant only in illustrating superficial motives or meaning that lies elsewhere. Clothes are not just the manifestations of immaterial ideas, but their forms and

qualities intervene in dynamic relationships (Keane *ibid*: 6-7). This reminds us of original resonances of fashion as a referent to giving form, or of the act of making as a process (Jones and Stallybrass 2000). Fashion implies 'investiture': that is, viewing clothing as the making of the person, as a public imprint or inscription recognisable to both the wearer and observer (Jones and Stallybrass 2000:2).

The idea of bringing into being, and future-oriented action, is important because sharp distinctions between surface and form, meaning and message, or sign and object, fall short of highlighting the relational value that having, wearing and showing allow. In underscoring the fact that Ikea furniture is a type of clothing, my research respondents identify the dual role of their interiors as a representation of the world while also being located in it (Keane 2003: 410). Implied ephemerality refers not only to the obsolescence of the range, but also to a much more intimate sense of mobility. Consequently, instead of understanding meaning as separate from a dematerialised sign, semiotic potential is always embodied in physical form, and is therefore open to the vagaries of differential interpretation. Adornment of the home or body implies continual configuration, regimentation, and on-going polysemous definition.

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