APPLYING PROBES AS AN INSPIRATIONAL RESEARCH TOOL FOR FASHION DESIGN

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ABSTRACT:

In general fashion design is a design field where users are seldom directly involved in the design process. It is only when developing very specific types of garments like uniforms or high performance athletic wear, fashion designers will consult end users to gain knowledge about specific demands or specifications. In this paper we will report from a project where we have developed and used probes as an integrated part of the design process.

KEYWORDS:
Fashion design, User integration, Inspiration probe, Design research

INTRODUCTION:

Different kinds of user centered design research methods like user observations and interviews are extremely valuable tools for many practicing designers. Such fieldwork enables an insight and an understanding of the users, which is a good basis for the development of innovative solutions creating understanding and interaction between designers and the end users.

We study fashion design at Danmarks Designskole and think as a whole the field of fashion design is a largely overlooked area when it comes to the use of user centered research methods. Only when developing very specific types of garments like uniforms or high performance athletic wear, fashion designers will consult end users to gain knowledge about specific demands or specifications.

Probes as a research tool gives plenty of opportunities for gathering many types of information, depending on the assignments posed in the probes. A probe functions as a means of self-documentation, where the user is asked to solve any number of tasks. It is possible to gather information about potential users in spite of geographical distance, as probe kits are normally distributed and returned by post (Mattelmäki, 2006).

For instance Mattelmäki writes:

"The probes provide access not just to people´s lives, but being visual and adressing multisensorial experiences, they are also useful for studying material aspects of people´s lives and environments." (Mattelmäki 2003, p. 121)

In this paper we explore the possibilities of using probes in connection with the development of a fashion collection intended for the retail market.

Fashion designers are often guided by personal intuition, individual style and current/coming trends when developing a new collection. Users are rarely consulted at any stage in the design process. As a starting point we believe that user based research and espesially probes could be very relevant for fashion designers. Probes seems to offer endless opportunities for user interaction. It is possible to extract answers to very specific questions but also gain an insight into the user´s personal realm of tastes and distinctions. Dependig on the individual assignments posed within the probe the answers seems to have the power/possibility to change the outcome of the collection and in any case offer inspiration, novel ideas and a different perspective which is valuable for the designers. *"The aim of design is to create new solutions. Inspiration probes aim at providing new insights for designers´creative thinking."* (Mattelmäki 2002, p. 129)

The question we have been investigating is: How can we as fashion designers use probes actively as a tool in the design process? In this paper our main focus will be on the development/design of the probes and the assignments within these. The probe is a designed object in itself. Therefore we need to make clear and concise choices regarding the contents, look and feel of the probe to ensure visual readabity. In addition to this we analyse the outcome of using probes within a fashion design project. The aim is to address which potentials lie in the use of probes for a fashion designer and where in the design process it would be obvious to use probes. Can the contents of probes be adjusted and tweaked to cohere with fashion design.

PREMISES FOR DEVELOPING OUR PROBE

We will focus specifically on the tangible development of probes suitable for a fashion collection. The contents and the assignments posed within the probes are grounded in the early stages of the design process and relate to research and the development of early ideas for a fashion collection intended for the retail market. We will predetermine the overall look and contents of

the probe based on how we as fashion designers would normally source inspiration, visuals and materials in the early stages of developing a collection. The materials gathered form the "base" for the contents of the probes. We will account for choices made in selecting assignments and general content of the probe. Choice of recipients and target group are based on the outline of the collection. We will analyse the contents and assignments in the probe and also the results/outcome when the probes are returned. We will compare probes as a means of research with other methods such as observations and interviews.

All in all a very hands on approach.

We have chosen to base our fashion collection on one of the most predominant current trends. An up to date take on the 90´s "Club – Kid" culture. We have made the first concious choices regarding colour (see fig. 1), materials (see fig. 3), overall mood (see fig. 2) and visual style of the collection. All these building blocks make up the base of the collection, from which we build the contents of the probes.

Fig. 1 Colour mood

Fig 2 Overall mood

Fig 3: Preselected materials for probe

The target group is defined by lifestyle, interests and attitude and not a certain age segment. In our case the target group is "young" people with a very strong sense of fashion and individual style. People who actively follow fashion and trends. (See fig. 4 and 5)

Fig 4 and 5: Visual examples of target group.

DESIGNING OUR PROBE

The content of a probe must be designed; *"the empathy building process begins with designing the material, imagining the possible contexts of experiences, projecting designers´ own ideas and questions about the research and design issues, and preparing a sensitive ear for undrstanding another person."* (Mattelmäki & Battarbee 2002, p. 128) It is the designer's task to shape the probe, so that he will get the most useful results out of it. For every new project the probe must be designed from scratch, with consideration for the needs/requirements of the individual project, target group, and problems to be solved. The quality of the result of course depends on which assignments the probe contains, and on the user's commitment, but also considerably on the preceding work of the designer.

Through the design of the probe, you can control the direction, in which the user unconsciously should go. You can help the user in the right direction, but at the same time you must be careful not to give the answers. You can give associations to lead the user's thoughts, and you can choose to make the individual tasks more or less controlled. Linguistically the tasks must be communicated in a way, that is easy to understand. It is important, that it seems manageable for the user to set to work on the individual tasks.

Our main idea is to make a package, which is a present in itself. It has to look exciting, you should want to open it and set to work on it, and it should be fun to do the tasks. Both because we have an idea, that we would find it fantastic ourselves, to get to make such an assignment. But also because we think that you get the best and most honest results, if the work is done out of pleasure, rather than duty.

Furthermore we of course have to be able to use the results professionally. Part of them must be useable as specific inspiration for a clothing collection, as the users are supposed to take an active part in the idea development phase. The other part is meant to teach us something about the individual user. That will help us get a better understanding of our target group, it's values and preferences.

We are asking the user to put some personality into the probe, and give some personal informations. Some might find it a bit intimidating, having to give such facts to strangers, or having to tackle something (for some) unfamiliar, such as drawing and making collages, and afterwards showing that to strangers – and worse, designers, who by definition are good at this type of work. For that reason the impression of the probe has to give a homemade feeling – it must seem to be what it is – a tool, an unfinished part of a process. Through that you can also give the impression, that you do not expect too much from the user. A too finished and perfect expression can have a deterrent effect. For the same reason it is also important that the users feel that they are taken seriously.

In our case the probe must be returned within a few days. That of course gives certain limitations compared to other cases, where the probes have been out for sev-

eral weeks or even months. You can say that the more time the user has, the more he will be able to think about the tasks, and they will become more natural to him. But very short lasting assignments can also be an advantage, as the user will act more impulsively. It depends on which purpose the probe is made for.

We have chosen to decide on some things in advance (universe, colours, silhouette, target group, and partly materials and style), to make sure that the results are not too diverse, so that we can faster get a useful return of the users' work. The design of the probe must be characterized by this, so that it naturally takes the next step in the process. For that reason the visual expression is very important to us, as we wish that the user more or less unconsciously follows the direction we have planned. The contents of the probe are partly inspired by the articles we have read about for example Cultural Probes.(Gaver, 1999). Here disposable cameras are often used as an easy tool for self documentation, just as illustrated cards with questions are used in various cases. Other contents we have developed from how a sketching process for a clothing collection can be started.

Fig. 6: Probe package

DESCRIPTION OF OUR PROBE

The envelope, which the user receives, swells with material (See fig. 6). On the outside are two pictures – one with the temporary title of the project – Street Style. The text is written in neon letters in different strong colours - this supports the visual style. The other picture helps to show the feeling.

Inside the user finds five envelopes with texts on them. You can clearly tell, that each envelope contains some-
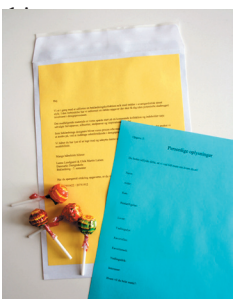

Fig. 7: Welcome letter and treat

First envelope (See fig. 7) – Welcome letter. We begin by telling the user what the project is all about. The user needs to feel that he is taken seriously, and we think that can be achieved among other things by giving him

an insight into our work. It also gives the impression of confidence, and a sense of importance. By this we also give the user something back for what he is about to give us. The envelope contains lollipops as a treat – a kind of reward, or bait. The lollipops are colourful, and are carefully chosen to match rest of the visual expression of the probe. Also, all texts are written on different coloured paper. There is a questionnaire in the envelope, that the user must fill in with personal information. Besides name, age, gender, and occupation, the user is asked about for example his favourite dish, and favorite animal. Already here the user is introduced to the playfull character of the probe, and is indirectly encouraged to have fun with it – we want to show him, that it is not too serious!

Second envelope (See fig. 8) – Photo registration assignment. The envelope contains a disposable camera, together with a list of things, that the user has to photograph. These are for example favorite piece of clothing, self portrait, something ugly, and so on. We also ask the user to write a short comment to each picture. The intention is to make the user think visually and personally, to decide on things purely subjectively. It is also a possibility for us to get to know the user better. The pictures are to show the person's style, taste, and preferences, and there is the opportunity for self staging.

Fig. 8: Photo Assignment

Fig. 9: Picture assignment

Third envelope (See fig. 9) – Picture assignment. Contains seven pictures with questions on the back. The pictures are carefully chosen in relation to the themes, colours, and target group of the collection. The user has to take a stand on the pictures, imagine things from them, and describe his associations. We have chosen some pictures that are very clear, and at least one that is more open for interpretation. That can both teach us something about the user, his way of reading pictures, and hopefully give us some words and thoughts, that can be useful in the further work with the collection. It will be interesting to see, if people interpret the pictures equally, and in the same way as we do.

Fourth envelope (See fig. 10) – Collage assignment. Contains two silhouettes in cardboard – a man and a woman. The silhouettes are cut roughly and out of proportions on purpose, to give the impression that it does not have to be perfect, and also as a reference or an introduction to the style. In addition to this there are some fabric samples, buttons, yarn, crepe paper, small

stickers, a colourful space hopper, etc., and a glue stick. We have cut the things in squares, to make sure we do not define shapes, and we write that the user can cut them into shape. At the same time some of the things already have a given shape and size – e.g. buttons and star shaped stickers. The materials are chosen in reference to the colour scheme and themes of the pictures. Thus we have given the user a setting, which he can operate within. On the other hand we do not ask him to think about the design of the collages, in order not to limit the spontaneous play with the materials.

Fifth envelope (See fig. 11) – Colour assignment. Contains the same two silhouettes as the collage assignment – this time in white cardboard. In addition to that children's markers in different colours. We encourage the user to draw and colour freely on the silhouettes, as much as he wants to. The purpose is more or less the same as with the collage assignment, but it is possible to express oneself in another way – from the completely abstract to the very concrete. This time the limitations lie in the colours, that are available. We have chosen also to include this section, because the colourful markers match the universe and the visual style well.

Fig. 10: Collage assignment

Fig. 11: Colour assignment

The two latter assignments are the ones we count on for getting the most concrete inspiration to the collection itself from. Since the users have to use the silhouettes we have made, they are "forced" to work with the human body – and that is exactly what clothing design is all about. In that way everything can be interpreted as something that goes on a body, and in the same scale. The user will unconsciously give us ideas for shape, colour weight and detailing. Even though we have provided the materials and conditions under which to work, we hope to get some unexpected results back.

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE USERS OF OUR PROBE
We are aware, that not everybody will take part in this type of assignment. Many people are not at all used to thinking visually, and on top of that having to produce something oneself, can be (too) big a challenge. Ideally you will send out so many probes, that you with some degree of uncertainty, still can be sure to get a number of replys. This is especially important, if you have no knowledge of the users. Experience shows, that sometimes only 20% of the respondents have delivered useful replys. (Gaver, 1999) In this case however, we

have chosen a small group of users. This is for the sake of manageability, and because we are dealing with an exercise.

The users of the probe must be potential users of the finished clothing collection. So they have to be within the target group, that we have determined, and which is described earlier.

We need both men and women. We have chosen some, who work with design themselves, and others who are in quite different professions. Some are students, others are fully trained, and are out in the labour market. Among these, one is self-employed. It will be interesting to see, if there are big differences in the replys, to finally be able to judge, if they all can be grouped under the same target group.

RESULTS OF OUR PROBE
We received replies from four users. All of them have completed the probe, although it was quite comprehensive, compared to the amount of time available. We will now go through some examples of results from each of the five assignments.

Task 1 – Personal information: The replies are different from each other, which is natural, when it comes to preference and taste. There are some common features, though. All the users are between 25 and 27 years old. Three men and one woman. Three of the users write coke as their favourite drink, and favorite snacks are chocolate for two users, liquorice, and Bugles (a form of chips) respectively. So they are not afraid to admit that they like unhealthy things. It is also fun to notice, that all their favourite dishes are traditional Danish, or translated into Danish, dishes – duck, open sandwiches, rump steak, curry meatballs and lasagna. That tells us, that the traditional things last – or have even returned – in the segment.
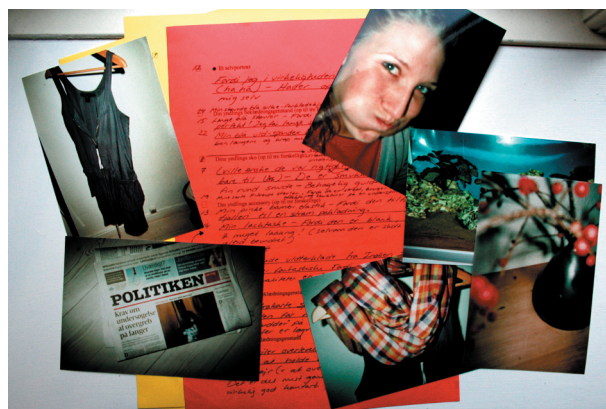

Fig. 12: Photo registration reply

Task 2 – Photo registration assignment (See fig. 12): All the users report back, that this was the assignment they liked the best – one even writes "Thank you for a fun registration!" as a comment. The replys are of course very individual. Some things have been chosen for their visual expression, while others are chosen from other parameters such as comfort, situation of use, and so on. Comment examples:
Rune:
"The piece of clothing you wear the most:" "Underpants

– it feels weird without them.”
“Your favourite shoes:” “Sneakers – Creative Recreation. I bought them on a lovely trip to Barcelona, they are different, and that makes them a bit cool.”
Johan:
“The most impractical thing in your wardrobe:” “Millennium tie. Can not use it again until in a thousand years!”
“Your wildest piece of clothing:” “This christmas tie, which is homemade, has been a bit wild to be wearing.”
Liv:
“Your wildest piece of clothing:” “My ultra short spandex denim skirt – Because it makes me look like a child and a ”prostitute” at the same time. I look like something unbelieveable, but that is rather funny!”
“Your favourite shoes:” “My black F-troupe boots. Because they are street, and use beautiful material effects and structures in a played down way!”
Jack:
“Your favourite piece of clothing:” “So easy to slip into – so comfortable, so soft shoes – that absorbate the smell of my sour feet!”
“Your wildest piece of clothing:” “!!! From avantgarde to british to modern to benny-look. The lining is fab!”
From the replys you can read which values are important to the individual. The replies all give the impression of a humoristic approach, but at the same time there are explanations to almost all the pictures.
It is also fun to see, how the individual users have chosen to take the pictures. In several of them they have thought about composition, which adds a little extra to the pictures – they are not ”just” registrations.
Task 3 – Picture assignment (See fig. 13): It is individual how the users read the pictures. It also depends on people’s backgrounds and interests, what values they put into them.
For example the picture of an art installation is read in four completely different ways. The question is: “What is this? What is going on?”
Johan: “A sensing room. Some persons are moving through a sensing room.”
Jack: “Young-not-at-all-experimenting-art-melting-together. Irritation, cheap, and smelly.”
Rune: “A big mess of objects with many different colours. To people feel sick because of all the colours.”
Liv: “We are on a folk high school of art. The café is being decorated to create atmosphere and chaos, so the party can get started sooner and easier!”
On the contrary they all associated almost alike, on the picture of disco balls; “Disco”, “party”, “dance”. That confirms our theory, that the signals of the picture are very clear, as we also knew that the art installation picture is more unclear.
A fun bonus from this assignment, is some of the words and sentences, that people have written. E.g. ”A glorified solar system”, ”The intoxications are his state of mind”, ”Madonna, Flirtation, Dance” - all something that can help to describe, and give a little extra to the mood and universe of the collection.
It also appears, that some users do not put up with any-

thing that we ask them to do. When we ask to describe the colours in a picture of a very brightly coloured

Fig. 13: Picture assignment reply

Fig. 14: Examples from collage asignment

Task 4 – Collage assignment (See fig. 14): The replys are very diverse.Two of the users have used nearly all the different materials available – even the space ball has been cut into pieces and glued onto the silhouettes, while the two others have selected a few materials, and achieved a much more simple expression. It is obvious, and wonderful to see, that there has been played. Some places pure shapes have been used, and set on the body without any reference. Other places there has been thought more concretely of clothing – e.g. pants have been cut out of the shapes, with details like pockets and buttons. Even though the collages are very different, there are some obvious elements that reaccur, and therefore a continuity is formed. All the users have for example used the small round yellow stickers for different purposes. One has made glasses, another a necklace, and two have placed them undefinably on the figure. Some of the users have made almost the same things – so it is already almost for sure, that the collection will contain silvery grey trousers and a multi coloured top with squares as a pattern.
Task 5 – Colour Assignment (See fig. 15): There is almost only used line, even though in the text we invite to also do colouring – make coloured areas. Some have drawn shapes and figures on the body, others have drawn tops and trousers. But it is obvious, that most of them have thought of prints on the clothes, when they

have been drawing. As well as in the collage assignment, there is both something abstract, and something more concrete to respond to.

The solutions from the tasks four and five are very different from each of the users, but because of the limitations we have defined, there are some common features. The colours and the silhouettes have been defined beforehand – and give a continuity.
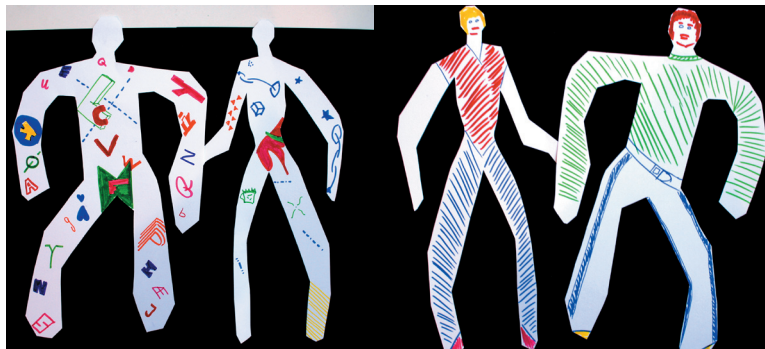

Fig. 15: Examples from colour assignment

DISCUSSION

There are a number of pros and cons regarding probes as a research tool. When seen in relation to observations or observations combined with interviews the designer is not able to supervise and answer questions if there are some while the assignments within the probe are solved, the users do not feel under surveillance while solving the different tasks. This lack of supervision can result in participants staging their environment, thereby portraying an idealised version of their taste and style. This tendency can be counter balanced by posing tasks and assignments with instructions and guidelines based on a well designed probe.

"Typically field work involves some combination of observation, informal interviewing, and participation in the ongoing events of the community". (Blomberg et al. 1993, p. 124)

There are several different kinds of observation, and in some cases these take place without any kind of interaction between the observer and the unknowing participant. This situation offers the most objective view of the situation and subject matter being studied. This is observation in its purest form. As soon as the participant becomes aware of the situation, the observation is disturbed. The subject becomes self concious.

When using probes there is no question about the purpose, everything is explained in detail. Probes when they are well designed are very clear and concise in their form. This does not guarantee a certain result as every individual person will have a different approach and a diverse frame of references while solving the tasks. Designers have many things to gain from this access into users personal realm, and all though probes seem very planned and precise in their form, surprises are bound to be in store.

Observations offer a far greater possibility for interaction and for gaining control in a certain situation. This is facilitated by the physical presence of the observer.

One rarely has the opportunity to intervene during the solving of tasks posed in probes, due to geographical distances and the intrusion into peoples private homes. *"The probes approach is visual, and minimizes the designer´s and researcher´s presence"* (Mattelmaki 2003, p. 129)

Another advantage to probes is the time frame, both designer and user have the luxury of time while producing and completing the probes. The stress of having to take notes while observing and conducting an interview is non existent.

In likeness with probes, observations combined with interviews can enthral the completion of different tasks. The execution of these tasks are likely to be influenced by the presence of the observer. The advantage of asking potential users to complete tasks on their own is the fact that you receive answers that truly reflect the users point of view, which tells a great deal about who they are.

To some extend you will always receive the observers take and interpretation of the situation. Observations are regardless the level of involvement always experienced from the outside looking in or at. They are always experienced by the observer and not the user. Probes offer the user´s point of view and perspective.

"The material the users provide with probes captures their world in their own terms and enables designers to utilize the user´s subjective interpretations directly as a source of inspiration". (Mattelmäki 2003, p. 122)

CONCLUSION

We view probes as an obvious opportunity for fashion designers to gain insight into the users minds, without having to spend endless amounts of time doing "hands on" observations and interviews. The target group comes alive within the mind of the designer through the given answers. In spite of physical distances it is possible to gain access into the lives of the users in a non invasive way. All though users have to make choices regarding personal tastes and preferences they have the opportunity to do so in the comfort of their own home, rendering the user in charge of what he or she wants the designer to see.

Fashion designers tend to have a very personal approach to the design process, relying solemnly on intuition and taste. Probes offer a direct connection to the target group and facilitate interaction between designers and end users. We view this interaction as a gift for the fashion designer. A gift that serves as inspiration, provides insight and knowledge.

We see a great potential in using probes as an intergrated tool in the design process. Seen through the eyes of a fashion designer probes offer a view of the user´s world experienced through the user´s own preferences, tastes and style. The work of the fashion designer comes to life.

It is a challenge in it self to design the content of the probe, the content has to coexist and interact in harmony with the rest of the project. The probe must be inviting and non threatening to the user, motivating interactivity and playfullness.

In our experience probes are a valuable tool in the designprocess and can come into play when designing a collection. We experienced a closeness to the users which gave an insight into the users´ lives. The results were very inspiring and could be applied to the collection as a whole or in parts as details. As designers we have the privilege of being able to pick and choose from the rich results of the probes, sculpting these into a coherent expression.

"Throughout the project, we have viewed aesthetic and conceptual pleasure as a right rather than a luxury."
(Gaver 1999, p. 25)

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