Spika and Tajt – Alternative Furniture for a Young Generation

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ACQUISITIONS/ SPIKA AND TAJT – ALTERNATIVE FURNITURE FOR A YOUNG GENERATION

Spika and Tajt – Alternative Furniture for a Young Generation

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According to KF’s (The Swedish Cooperative Union) 1972 brochure about the Spika furniture set, "anyone can put Spika together".¹

The shelves’ originator was the architect Erik Karlström who, aided by his apprentice Magnus Silfverhielm, designed them in 1967.² In 2018, Silfverhielm said that one day Karlström walked into the office’s afternoon coffee break and presented his idea for shelving built from one standard piece of particle board, measuring 210 x 120 cm and 16 mm thick. From this, he had designed a piece of furniture that was 203 cm high and had five shelves, 53 cm wide and 26 cm deep. However, there was limited enthusiasm about the shelves in the coffee room, with only Silfverhielm expressing any delight in this simple piece of furniture. He was tasked with producing a prototype. After several attempts, he found a panel pin from Gunnebo Bruk in Småland with the right qualities for nailing together the porous particle board.³

The shelves were noticed by KF’s textiles manager, Hedvig Block-Hedqvist, when she visited the architects’ office, and Spika was launched in KF Interiör’s range.⁴ Its sections had pre-drilled holes and were nailed together by the consumer. The shelves that Magnus Silfverhielm generously donated to the Nationalmuseum’s collections in 2017 are the ones originating from the office (Fig. 1). Spika was soon expanded into a set that included a low bed frame, seating, desk, trolley and stereo bench. Magnus Silfverhielm designed a textile for the Spika range, with a pattern inspired by the Moorish palace, the Alhambra in Granada, Spain (Fig. 2). The pattern was printed on calico.⁵ 1.3 million shelves were manufactured and, in 1969, it was awarded furnishing of the year by Allt i Hemmet magazine.

The Spika shelves can be regarded as a symbol of people’s changing attitudes to possessions at the end of the 1960s, but to understand its significance we must examine it in a wider context.

In the first half of the 20th century, the idea of a “more beautiful everyday item” was the guiding principle for Swedish design.⁶ Simply put, this vision was built upon the following assumption: that the beautiful everyday item was an object with a practical function, which was so well designed that it was equally suitable for everyday life and for celebrations. To create objects that fulfil this high aesthetic quality, industry would cooperate on their product development with artists or designers. Thanks to industrial mass production, the price of more beautiful everyday items would be so reasonable that they could reach broad consumer groups. The items would be produced by Swedish companies, creating jobs in Sweden and improving the national economy, particularly if they were so attractive that they could also be exported.

The realisation of the above vision turned out to be more difficult than its promoters – politicians, reformers,
individuals could have different needs and that these could change at different stages of life. It was therefore impossible to continue talking about “right and wrong” consumption in the way that the arbiters of taste were doing. It was notable that Larsson was the one to present this opinion, as she had been a representative of the taste education movement for many years.

However, in 1960–61, interior architect Lena Larsson broadened this perspective through the buy-use-dispose debate. Here, Larsson maintained that consumption was “a human right”, that different individuals could have different needs and that these could change at different stages of life. It was therefore impossible to continue talking about “right and wrong” consumption in the way that the arbiters of taste were doing. It was notable that Larsson was the one to present this opinion, as she had been a representative of the taste education movement for many years.
Larsson’s pragmatic approach to consumption and design was linked to the general development of Swedish society. Growth was strong and women had entered the labour market. From searching for rational and collective solutions to societal problems through policy, there was increasing consideration of individuals’ uniqueness, their varying dreams and desires. Perhaps creating well designed, high quality furniture that could be passed down through generations was not what was wanted? Why did furniture have to be a major financial investment? Couldn’t you just as well buy a folding chair when you bought a crate of beer? This more easy-going attitude to furnishing’s status and durability inspired designers to create furniture with flexibility as the key concept. The Spika shelves must be interpreted in this light if their radicalness and significance is to be understood.

The success of the Spika shelves was an inspiration. In 1969, KF Interiör presented a combined sofa/bed, Laban, designed by Ingvar Carlsson. Soft stuffed cushions in brown corduroy rested on a chipboard frame. In 1972, IKEA launched Byggbiten, which was a similar but more advanced furniture system. Byggbiten was designed by Stephan Gip and constructed as modules. Consumers bought chipboard and variously sized wooden parts that were fixed together with the included brackets and screws to make different pieces of furniture, all depending on the customer’s individual needs. Like Spika, the consumers chose the cushions and covers, as well as whether the furniture was painted or not.

Stephan Gip was one of the more progressive designers of that decade. His inflatable Blow-Up furniture was launched in 1967 (Fig. 3) and is reminiscent of an inflatable swim ring. By using air as both the filling and frame, the furniture was weightless and easy to move between rooms. When it was no longer needed, it could be deflated and stored in the ward-
robe. The furniture was a consumable; the idea was that it would be so cheap that a new one could be purchased if one broke. However, a repair kit was included. The same year, Gip also launched an octagonal bunkbed called P-Sängen, also called “play furniture for adults”.

In the autumn of 2017, the Nationalmuseum acquired another piece of furniture that reflects the period’s freer approach to home interior design. Thanks to funding from the Ulla and Gunnar Trygg Fund, Gillis Lundgren’s sit-lie-recline furnishing, Tajt, is included in the museum’s collections (Fig. 3). Like Spika, Blow-Up and Laban, Tajt radiates ease. This low, stuffed piece of furniture can easily be transformed from a chair to a recliner or bed. It has two quadratic cushions and a round backrest clad in denim. Tajt was launched by IKEA in 1973, when it featured on the cover of the company catalogue (Fig. 4).

With the important acquisitions of Spika and Tajt, the Nationalmuseum is delighted to be able to boost its collection of innovative design from the years around 1970.

Notes: