In this paper I discuss similarities between Ikea's profile and Sweden as a brand: Ikea's co-opting of a nationally inflected discourse of social democracy and how Sweden, in turn, has co-opted Ikea as an index of national values. Ikea provides an example of the relationships between perceptions of national image and the process of imaging the national.

Functional. Pared-down. Blond. Socially responsible. This is how Swedish design is often described and the image corresponding to Ikea provides an example of the relations between perceptions of national image on the one hand, and the process of imagining the national, on the other. In this paper I will discuss similarities between Ikea's Swedish profile and Sweden as a brand: Ikea's co-opting of a nationally inflected discourse of social democracy and how Sweden, in turn, has co-opted Ikea as an index of national values.

The material studied consists of manuals with guidelines and rules about Ikea's product line and corporate profile. These publications are intended for in-house use. My discussion also engage theory and debates about nation branding and notions of Sweden. In the 1990s design played a central role in shaping the image of the nation. For example, the Swedish Institute, the official Swedish agency responsible for international cultural relations, was charged with selling Swedish design. An activity which was also identified as crucial for the economic growth.1

In my ongoing research I examine Ikea, focusing on the 1980s and 1990s, when the company's symbolic connection to Sweden and Swedish design was constructed and expressed in various ways.2 Ikea provides an example of the relations between perceptions of national image on the one hand, and the process of imaging the national, on the other. In the 1980s, which included an in-house training program, "The Ikea Way", and a modernisation of the entire product line. Resulting in a distinctly pronounced Scandinavian identity.3

An elaborate logistic system that keeps track of thousands of products and which also has a Scandinavian profile.4

Ikea's identity is well-known and recognizable. The global chain's blue stores with yellow logotype on the façade, inevitably evoke Sweden. All products are consistently given Swedish names: the armchair Poäng is Poäng in Stockholm as well as in Riyadh. The store restaurants serve Swedish meatballs and the food markets sell Swedish crackers and herring: "A Taste of Sweden". The company also claims to have its ideological roots in Sweden: "Ikea was founded when Sweden was fast becoming an example of the caring society, where rich and poor alike were looked after. This is also a theme that fits well with the Ikea vision".5

The Swedish identity has not always been there. Originally Ikea was spelled in the French manner (Ikéa) and the furniture had Italian and American names, such as: Piccolo, Forum, Strega, Verona, La Plata, Swing, Tender and Cowboy. The current positioning is the result of a gigantic branding operation, initiated in the 1980s, which included an in-house training program, "The Ikea Way", as well as an overhaul of the entire product line. Resulting in a distinctively pronounced Scandinavian identity.4 An elaborate logistic system that keeps track of thousands of products and which also has a Scandinavian profile.7

In Ikea's in-house manuals – guidelines and rules for how Ikea's product line, range presentations and corporate profile – the Scandinavian profile is emphasized time and again in different ways. The employees are encouraged to emphasize the Scandinavian identity because it is: "an opportunity to strengthen our Swedish IKEA profile".8 The style strategy is "to broaden styles for more people's tastes while our identity is the unique Scandinavian profile."9 This style is described in key words such as 'functional', 'practical', 'solid wood' and 'blond'.10 Furthermore, the ikea stores are said to be 'characterised by an architecture based on Swedish functionalistic tradition. The building is visu-

1 In recent years, the Scandinavian design tradition has been redefined and questioned. One example is Kyrill Fallan (ed.) Scandinavian Design: Alternative Histories, Berg, London, 2012.
2 The project is funded by Rolandstabens jubileumsfond (RJ) which is an independent foundation with the goal of promoting and supporting research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.
5 http://www.ikea.com
6 The IKEA Way is the name of one of the many courses that are included in the company's extensive training programme, and is today used as a concept. Nowadays there are a plethora of courses in a variety of areas. These are assembled in an Ikea's internal database "Toolbox". Study in this database and interview with Ivana Hedin, 3/12/03.
7 Interview Lea Kumpolainen and Lennart Ekmark, 12/06/09. Kumpolainen and Ekmark has worked at Ikea since 1960s in leading positions and developed this system.
10 ibid
ally clear, informal, simple and stripped to essentials.\textsuperscript{11}

In fact, the typical Ikea store is distant from what is known as folkhemsarkitektur [The People’s Home Architecture] in Sweden: buildings from the 1940s - and 50s are characterized by hand-crafted elements and materials such as brick and wood. Ikea is rather a precursor to the so-called “big boxes” or “category killers” – buildings with the simplest possible interior – like Toys”R Us and Wal-Mart.

2. Sweden and Swedish design history: a marketing strategy

It was when Ikea expanded internationally during the 1980s that Swedish profile was improved and developed. But national identity became important already in the 1970s, when the company established outside Sweden. One reason was that the stores abroad had different looks and the style needed to be strengthened and regulated.\textsuperscript{12} In 1976, founder Ingvar Kamprad and his closest associates, concluded that:

Not only with respect to range, but, even with regard to range presentations, the Swedish profile must be preserved. The Swedish profile referred to is IKEA’s interpretation of the word “Swedish”. Most companies in Sweden presents its range, in a way that we are not prepared to describe as Swedish.\textsuperscript{13}

The strong corporate culture is a key factor in Ikea. In the 1980s, Ikea started to use what they called Kulturambassadörer [Cultural ambassadors]: co-workers who learned employees abroad about Swedish values and Swedish culture.\textsuperscript{14} In 2010, IKEA Tillverkarna [IKEA Together], opened, a corporate cultural center in Almhult, Sweden, which offers kick-offs, team-building exercises, training programmes and annual meetings.\textsuperscript{15}

During the 1980s and 90s, Ikea consistently makes references to an established view of both Sweden and Swedish or Scandinavian design, which is often portrayed as being influenced by a social and democratic paths. There are a number of surveys of Swedish design, but most of them repeat well-known facts, phenomena and socially committed exhibitions. Publications such as Ellen Key’s Skönhet för alla [Beauty for All, 1899], Gregor Paulsson’s Vackrare vardagsvara [Better Things for Everyday Life, 1919] and acceptera (1931) are mentioned repeatedly.\textsuperscript{16}

Ikea successfully utilises these ideas and simply turn well-known mottos in the Swedish design history into slogans. One example is the catalogue for the furniture line Stockholm in 1990, which is called Vackrare vardag [A More Beautiful Everyday Life]: a paraphrase of Gregor Paulsson’s publication from 1919. Under the heading Skandinavisk hemkänsla [Scandinavian Domesticity] a romantic image is described:

That light is the main characteristic of Scandinavian Domesticity, one understands when looking at the map of Europe and you see how far north Scandinavia is situated... The furniture is usually bright, and made of wood that grows in Scandinavia: beech, pine, birch, with its natural aging visible. When the furniture is painted, they tend to be painted in white and light colours to give light. Another characteristic is that the Scandinavian interior design is often simple and clean.\textsuperscript{17}

Ikea often tries to project an image of not being a capitalist company but one with a social commitment. This is described in, for example, Democratic Design (1995), published in conjunction with the company’s 50th anniversary:

As everyone who has grown up in Sweden has learnt – either from their Dad, or from society in general – people who are not at all that well off should still be given the same opportunities as people who are. It’s hardly surprising that, as a Swedish company, Ikea espouses Swedish values.\textsuperscript{18}

The phrase “Democratic design” is used in different contexts, such as in a pamphlet (1996) which contains a section headed “Design for everyone”; a rewrite of Key’s Beauty for all.\textsuperscript{19} The catalogue also contains the article “History of Nordic design: From the late 1880s to the late 1900s”, by design historian Kerstin Wickman. The text provides an established depiction of Nordic design, which is described as being inspired by nature and cast in a democratic setting with social paths: “Unlike the rest of Europe, the aesthetic debate in the Nordic countries was part of the democratization process.”\textsuperscript{20}

A similar depiction is given in the catalogue to the first PS-collection, 1995, which was presented, as a kind of “post scriptum” to the rest of the product line and launched under the headline “Democratic Design” in Milan, Italy. The collection was characterized by a stripped-down, neo-modernistic expression and in the catalogue it was described as “Design for everyone”:

The Swedish model has also become synonymous with a high utility value, good function and quality, and an ambition for easy access... Ikea PS works with the aesthetics of simplicity that was defined back in the mid-19th century and which has long gone under the name of Swedish Modern.\textsuperscript{21}

Behind Ikea’s external image – expressed through the publications mentioned above - are internal manuals, guidelines and rules about how the brand should be portrayed. These in-house publications are produced by Inter IKEA Systems B.V. that – similar to a central station – owns and manages the business concept. The history and image of Ikea is not static; it has developed, changed and been described in various ways over the years. But
3. Ikea and the Swedish Model: Paradise lost?

By references to Swedish design history and the romantic image of Sweden, Ikea makes use of established beliefs – and in doing so, reinforce them. However, there are different ways of looking at Sweden and Swedish design. The image is perhaps selling but the question is whether it reflects reality. The notion of Swedish design corresponds to the established image of Sweden as a “model state”. Marquis Child’s book Sweden: The Middle Way (1936) is one of the more common descriptions of the idea of the Swedish model as the middle way between communism and capitalism. But the idea of Sweden plays a crucial part in the Swedish self-image. The success story of how Sweden went from a recent past of inequality and poverty to a Social-Democratic welfare state, has been recycled by a numbers of Swedish historians.

In the late 1970s the Swedish model reached the peak of its influence and began to be challenged. In the 1980s the Social Democratic model began to lose its hegemony in the intellectual debate. The crisis and depression that characterized the 1990s was followed by a debate where the ideological foundations of the Swedish model were questioned, including the moral and normative foundations, which were criticised for putting the common good before the interest of individual citizens and minorities.24

The historian Jenny Andersson presents the idea that, after the crises of the 1990s, the “Swedish Model” was back again and Sweden emerged as a renewed utopia. One example that supports this idea is the publication by journalist Robert Taylor’s pamphlet Sweden — Proof That A Better World Is Possible [2005].25 Another example is Fishing in Utopia [2008], by the journalist Andrew Brown, in which he describes his infatuation with the social democratic model society. He deplores the fact that this society no longer exist, and grieves a disappeared future.26

Andersson also claims that Sweden post 1990s suffers from a kind of nostalgia, in which the Swedish Model emerges as a kind of paradise lost. The concept “People’s home” became a slogan and was used as a political strategy for reclaiming a lost utopia. The decade also witnessed a revival of interest in Nordic design (or Scandinavian, which is often used synonymously in the English-speaking world), both in its more exclusive variants such as the work of Danish designers like Hans Wegner and Kaare Klint, as well as mass-produced versions like Ikea.27

This can be understood in the light of nation branding. It is well-known that recent decades have been marked by a revival of nationalism. Although it is not synonymous with older forms of nationalism, national images and stereotypes seem to become more important in an era of globalization. This is also an observable fact in Sweden, where there have been debates about the notion of Swedishness and what defines Swedish values.28 The way Swedes conceive of Sweden is a fundamental part of how the image is shaped abroad, and in this context Ikea plays an important role.

4. ‘The Social Democrats built the welfare state. Ingvar Kamprad furnished it.’

This has become a saying in Sweden. In 2008, Ikea came on top of the Förtroendebarometern, an annual survey of the institutions in Swedish society and what level of confidence Swedes have for them.29 The result can be understood as an expression of national mythologizing. Ikea is frequently described with references to politics: ‘IKEA is a community builder as much as a home decorator. Side by side with national political programmes, the company has slogged away to realise the founders project: to be for the many people by the means of, as they say, a democratic design.’30 And the founder Kamprad is often portrayed as a philanthropic politician rather than a crass businessman, by others and himself. ’What keeps me going is the feeling that in a broader sense, I participate in a massive democratization project.’31

Kamprad is a kind of advertising figure for Ikea. He not only personifies the brand but also an image of Sweden and a general Swedish self-image. But, like the success story of the Swedish welfare, Kamprad has been criticized. Most damning are the revelations about the founder’s involvement in Nazi movements. Journalistic investigations by those in power are usually welcomed by Swedes. But in this case there was a widespread disapproval of the criticism. This might be due to the exalted view of Kamprad and Ikea among Swedes. It is possible that Swedes want to maintain the Swedish success story and the myths of Sweden. A postmodern understanding of history claims that it is not fixed, but instead a construct that can be produced and used for different purposes. According to this approach, there are multiple pro-

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29 Förtroendebarometern is produced by Medieakademien, Gothenburg. http://www.medieakademien.se
ducers of history. A company, like IKEA, is one such producer. This leads to questions like: What happens when history becomes a part of corporate branding? The corporation’s creation of history has certainly a commercial motivation but, in a larger perspective, it can have political, ideological and existential consequences.

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