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## Indie Magazines as Brands: Aesthetic Communication and Designing the *Kinfolk* Experience

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# Indie Magazines as Brands: Aesthetic Communication and Designing the *Kinfolk* Experience

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past years, *Kinfolk* magazine's minimalist aesthetics has created a visual voice for a global slow lifestyle audience. Although *Kinfolk* has become a publishing phenomenon with many imitators, lifestyle magazines are frequently treated as light fare. Pioneering this particular genre of lifestyle magazine, *Kinfolk* fulfills a deeper purpose of helping readers define themselves. The magazine helps curate and perform lives and strives for authenticity, attraction, and positive valuation to generate short-term affective experiences and long-term cultural value. This article analyzes *Kinfolk*'s aesthetics as an architecture of relations assembling visual and textual page arrangements that are recurrently meant to be looked at more than read. While current studies associate *Kinfolk*'s slow lifestyle with Instagram's blend of people and photography, this article seeks to demonstrate how editors, designers, and art directors have extended the visual personality of the magazine. In doing so, it will explore the magazine's advanced aesthetic communication, establishing *Kinfolk* as the template for the millennial set and the culture of neomodernism.

## KEYWORDS

Magazine studies, independent magazines, design, media, lifestyle, advertisement aesthetics, materiality, multimodality, visual communication, *Kinfolk*

## Design and Community

This article focuses on the so-called bible of slow lifestyle magazines. Since its launch in 2011, the independent magazine *Kinfolk* has become one of the most influential and omnipresent periodicals of this decade. *Kinfolk* not only has become the aspirational template for the millennial set, but — in less than five years — it has also established notions of Kin-centric living on a global scale. Published as a quarterly, its matte cover with a pastel-coloured background and its minimalist style in terms of layout and colour scheme have produced a *Kinfolk* aesthetic frequently pigeonholed as visualizing a middle-class lifestyle with its key areas of home, food, travel, people, and fashion. The magazine's colour schemes and colour harmony have even infiltrated language — the expression, 'Oh it's very Kinfolk', demonstrates the journal's success in pushing a specific aesthetic order that influences the ways people use objects and deploy meanings associated with the material. One critic — with tongue in cheek — called it 'the last lifestyle magazine', drawing our attention to 'how *Kinfolk* created the dominant aesthetic of the decade with perfect lattes and avocado toast'.<sup>1</sup> In the context of a declining magazine industry over the last decade, *Kinfolk* has become a phenomenon in the rejuvenation of print and independent publishing today.<sup>2</sup>

The magazine's quiet approach to life and its visually seductive arrangements of ideas, pictures, and activities inspire thousands of subscribers worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Hatched as a local indie magazine in Oregon and moving its headquarters to Copenhagen, *Kinfolk* has expanded into distinct editions published in four languages (English, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean). In addition to presenting *Kinfolk* books and events around the world, the magazine serves as the flagship publication of Ouur Media, 'a lifestyle publisher and agency creating print and digital media for a young creative audience'.<sup>4</sup> *Kinfolk* is itself a material media object, based upon a very intimate curatorial design displaying the stuff of life furnished with personal stories. As I argue herein, the magazine embodies the 'communities of taste' developing around the magazine as a source that sacralizes the profane while seeking to maintain the indie magazine's nonconformist and cutting-edge vision.<sup>5</sup> As such, *Kinfolk* highlights the significance of 'doing taste' that differs from commodified mainstream glossies and offers followers the magazine as a desirable object based on a specific semantic-semiotic environment for engineering taste.

Today, while *Apartamento* (2008–), *Cereal* (2012–), and *The Weekender* (2012–) have made their way onto the racks of high street newsagents shaping our view of successful indies, *Kinfolk* pursues a different aesthetic strategy. Its visual and textual arrangements exceed today's prevalent modes of indie publishing. Unlike the busy, overcrowded, and eye-catching pages of *Flaneur* and other more radical print experimentations, *Kinfolk*'s 'indie-ness' is characterized both by redesigns that keep up an engaging pace for its global readership and by communicating a unified aesthetics for 'young creative professionals'.<sup>6</sup> *Kinfolk* provides this global class a visual voice. It feeds particular interaction into consumer groups and supports their 'ongoing explorations of quality of life', promoting

1 Kyle Chayka, 'The Last Lifestyle Magazine', *Racked* (14 March 2016), no page.

2 Megan Le Masurier, 'Independent Magazines and the Rejuvenation of Print', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15.4 (2012), 383–98; Susan Currie Sivek, 'Magazines as Displaced Technologies of the Self', *Journal of Magazine Media*, 19.1 (2019), 1–16.

3 The most recent 'Kinfolk Magazine Reach' claims a circulation of 85,000 copies; see Ronja Witterstein, 'Kinfolk Studio: Business Development Plan', *Issuu* (2 October 2018), no page.

4 'Info — Ouur' [accessed 10 December 2019].

5 Timothy Holmes and Jane Bentley, 'Specialist Magazines as Communities of Taste', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, ed. by Martin Conboy and John Steel (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 273–84 (p. 273).

6 See inside flap of front cover, *Kinfolk*, no. 14 (2014), no page.

the trend toward self-optimization.<sup>7</sup> *Kinfolk's* content marketing builds upon a specific message highlighting what I propose to call the affective attractiveness of cultural capitalism. As such, *Kinfolk* advances notions of singularity and singular consumption based on a human-centric design. The magazine's visual language evokes emotions, moods, and atmospheres permeated by commodities and advertisement culture that privilege reduced forms, natural materials, and a neutral, harmonious feeling as *Kinfolk's* trademarks.

In doing so, *Kinfolk* has become one of the most divisive and polarizing titles among contemporary independent magazines. Animosity has been directed towards its founder Nathan Williams and the magazine's alleged Mormon background. Some commentators see a direct link between the magazine's signature aesthetics of purity, minimalism, and whiteness and a sprawling empire of evangelicalism and capitalism. Others see in it a bastion of white hipsterdom — the 'Kinspiracy' of a global design family, all devotees posting the same objects on Instagram, worshipping creativity and sharing a passion for style.<sup>8</sup> More serious attempts to understand *Kinfolk's* success come out of consumer research studies and design studies. Critics analyze the magazine as a complex discursive system — a taste regime — by pointing out that taste regimes orchestrate visual and material order in many aesthetic domains of consumption, including cooking, eating, fashion, travel, and home decoration. A regime offers shared meaning and values that allow individuals to produce and reproduce material representations of a given arrangement of objects, doings, and meanings with a high degree of fidelity.<sup>9</sup>

*Kinfolk's* reproductive dimension makes the magazine appear as an assemblage of visual forms to be replicated by the magazine's followers. Since *Kinfolk's* release occurred only a few months after Instagram's online opening, the magazine has been declared a provider for 'Instagrammable settings'.<sup>10</sup> Since it is certainly true that '*Kinfolk* and Instagrammers represent a lifestyle', there is a slight difference between the magazine's promotion of delving into home, style, and work and Instagram posts.<sup>11</sup> As earlier magazine covers tell us, '*Kinfolk's* original motivation behind subjects and aesthetics ¼ was the cultivation of gatherings with friends and family, while young Instagrammers adopted and extended the style to capture all kinds of situations'.<sup>12</sup> Suggesting that *Kinfolk's* taste regime feeds into mainstream consumer culture around the globe, 'furthering the aestheticization of the consumer', downplays the complexity of the magazine as a multimodal and material object, especially when considering how it applies very specific aesthetic strategies, combined with other modes in typography, page and document design, colour, and affect.<sup>13</sup>

In the following, I propose to analyze the magazine's printed surfaces as performative sites of what Giuliana Bruno calls 'technological alchemy'.<sup>14</sup> Bruno claims that 'the physicality of a thing one can touch does not vanish with the disappearance of

7 *Kinfolk*, no. 32 (2019), 9; see Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New*, trans. by Steven Black (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 26.

8 Summer Allen, 'Wood, Citrus, Lattes, Feet, Twine, Repeat: The *Kinfolk* Kinspiracy Code', *The Gawker* (31 March 2015), no page.

9 Zeynep Arsel and Jonathan Bean, 'Taste Regimes and Market-Mediated Practice', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39.5 (2013), 899–917 (p. 902); K. Burckha, 'Kinfolk: An Aesthetic, a Lifestyle, a Brand', (31 January 2016), no page.

10 Jonathan Bean, Avid Khorramian, and Kelsey O'Donnell, '*Kinfolk* Magazine: Anchoring a Taste Regime', *Consumption Markets and Culture*, 21.1 (2018), 82–92 (p. 90).

11 Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (Creative Commons, 2017), p. 95.

12 Manovich, p. 95.

13 Bean et al., p. 90.

14 Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetic, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), p. 7.

its material but can morph culturally, transmuting into another medium'.<sup>15</sup> Examples for such transformations in which things occur on the surface of another medium are film, photography, and the printed page. Bruno's notion of materiality is therefore not restricted to the question of materials, but raises questions about how surface conditions activate material relations. Exploring *Kinfolk's* 'surface condition', I aim to convey a sense of the magazine's 'other way' symbolizing the desire for an aesthetic and ethical alternative to neoliberalist capitalism with its superficial industrial designs and interiors.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the magazine's heavy visual and tactile feel, given its thick and coated paper surfaces, is central to understanding *Kinfolk's* enduring aesthetics and its attempt to change the scope of life. Since most critics focus on the magazine's formative years as a regional and communal indie journal produced out of Portland, I will first examine the two major redesigns that occurred in 2014 and 2016 in order to study the magazine's visual personality. In a second step, I expand my argument and discuss the magazine's advanced aesthetic communication in conjunction with *Kinfolk's* close cooperation with Danish designer firms. In the context of organizations, Ole Thyssen identifies six aesthetic domains of communication: name/image, rhetoric, narrative, design, advertising, and architecture. Design plays a key role since 'design fits the formula of aesthetic communication — by sensuous [sic] means an imaginary and, therefore, invisible world is evoked which attunes the receiver in a certain way. As the imaginary world is purely symbolic, the desire stimulated by and oriented towards design has no natural limit'.<sup>17</sup> Teaching the magazine's readers not *what*, but rather *how*, to consume, *Kinfolk's* art direction aligns itself with the 'New Nordic' and its design ideology. Focusing on the interaction between the magazine's branded content and visual storytelling, I reassess *Kinfolk's* credo for slow living as a paradoxical message that becomes visible in the magazine's 'Nordic' approach to design, experimentation with different materials, and the shared history of things and people.

### The Magazine's Visual Personality

Since its launch in 2011, *Kinfolk* has reinforced the visual and written mode, and the magazine's surface has engaged photographic design and material culture. What distinguishes *Kinfolk* from other minimalist magazines is art direction and design. Amanda Jane Jones, the founding art director, moulded *Kinfolk's* unique visual feel so that that it looked less like magazines of the time, such as *Monocle* (2007–) and *Oh Comely* (2010–).<sup>18</sup> Under Jones's direction, the magazine's minimalist style embraced a classic layout that appeared rather bookish and invited a reading from cover to cover. To give the magazine a classic timeless quality, Jones used the old-fashioned serif typeface Garamond. Pastel coloured spreads — numbered 'one', 'two' and 'few' — functioned as dividers for different sections. The layout promised a rather sequential reading experience. Textual cohesion and colour coordination were simple and straightforward, relying on a fixed text-image-text pattern. Moreover, what distinguished *Kinfolk* from other magazines was the communicative role of colour, whereby Jones created an appealing 'grammar of color',<sup>19</sup> highlighting the magazine's affordance. Assessing periodicals as a means of affection echoes what environmental psychologist James Gibson calls

15 Bruno, p. 7.

16 Bruno, p. 7.

17 Ole Thyssen, *Aesthetic Communication* (Arhus: VÆRK, 2006), no page; see also Ole Thyssen, *Aesthetic Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 178–212.

18 See 'Monocle Brand: A Lesson in Tastemaking', *Creative Supply* (13 April 2018), no page.

19 Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, 'Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for a Grammar of Colour', *Visual Communication*, 1.3 (2002), 343–68.

'affordance'.<sup>20</sup> This term refers to the invitation a specific thing embodies: a chair, for instance, invites you to sit down, or a pen to write. By learning the affordances of a thing, we learn the thing's social world and become members of that world. Likewise, the affordances of a magazine invite the reader not only to interact with it as a stable object of words and images across multiple copies, but also to follow its multiple paths that together comprise the magazine's organism through which people and things move.

*Kinfolk's* affect and emotive appeal depended on the scaling of colours, especially saturation, purity, and modulation. Under Jones's art directorship, images appeared static within huge white borders with high saturation or dark manifestations of colour (Fig. 1). According to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, colours signal values that pertain to specific experiences; they suggest that 'high saturation may be positive, exuberant, adventurous, but also vulgar and garish'.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 1 'Renaissance Juicing: Our Favorite Combinations', *Kinfolk*, no. 24 (2012), 18; courtesy of Kinfolk

The portrait's saturated colour schemes resembled Baroque still-life paintings with the slight difference that they gather people around small things and foodstuffs, pushing

20 James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986).

21 Kress and Leeuwen, p. 356.



the magazine's message as one that serves the reader as 'a guide for small gatherings'.<sup>22</sup> Vegetables' and fruit's generic colours — i.e. the carrot's orangish-yellow — express the essential quality of things. The large white frame emphasized the portrait's value of purity. The spread's balanced colour scheme expressed the magazine's communal ideology, one built upon organic interactions between people and things. While Jones helped create a signature design synonymous with a particular eco-hipster aesthetic, the magazine ran the risk of becoming a niche product addressing 'millennials with a penchant for beards, lattes, itchy jumpers and food photographed from above'.<sup>23</sup>

After thirteen issues, the magazine suddenly looked stagnant and somehow out of sync with developments in slow-lifestyle trends. Volume fourteen marked the first redesign, directed by British designer Charlotte Heal. The original pastoral appearance gave way to a fresh cosmopolitan aesthetics and a European style expressed by changes in typography, full bleed images, a new cover design, and an extension of 'the visual personality of the magazine'.<sup>24</sup> Heal used new colour schemes to replace the blurry watercolours and the pale, restrained colours of previous issues. Her redesign enlivened the pages and gave the magazine a more postmodern and hybrid look. Heal's redesign relied on an international network of collaborators and sought to create more diverse content. A good case in point was the feature 'The Meaning of Light'.<sup>25</sup> Under Heal's art direction and layout, this was a patchwork piece composed of interviews with leading neuroscientists, written by Georgia Frances King (editor of books on complex topics which became *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestsellers), with artwork by German photographer Uta Barth. Heal moved beyond the rustic feel of *Kinfolk's* founding issues and reinvigorated the magazine's philosophy of vision and art by creating a different 'affect structure' in dealing with things.<sup>26</sup> Heal has suggested that 'we overlook such fundamental elements of our lifestyle like light and how much we could benefit from re-evaluating our relationship to it'.<sup>27</sup> Heal's re-evaluation replaced the magazine's original flat and generic colours by introducing modulated colours into *Kinfolk's* image discourse (see Fig. 2). Modulated colours, as Kress and van Leeuwen explain, 'show the colour of people, places and things as it is actually seen, under specific lighting conditions. Hence the truth of flat colour is an abstract truth, and the truth of modulated colour a naturalistic, perceptual truth'.<sup>28</sup> The feature's in-depth journalism was embedded within an image cycle; Uta Barth's photographs and her use of modulated colours mirrored the relationship between light, space, surface, and vision.

In the *nowhere near* series (1999), Barth juxtaposed, for instance, twenty similarly blurry images of the view from her living-room window, photographed over a twelve-month period. The feature's opening photograph was taken from Barth's *untitled* series (2012), in which she isolated a single motif and used it as the basis for new comparative images. She also brought her chosen subjects into a more intimate spatial relationship with the viewer. In the context of the feature, this comparison between the modulated colours of a 'deep blue day' and the light pollution of the digital age was discussed in King's text.<sup>29</sup>

22 See the *Kinfolk's* magazine subhead on cover 4 (2012), no page.

23 Josh Williams, 'Kinfolk: The Face of the Slow Lifestyle Trend', *Creative Supply* (21 February 2019), no page.

24 James Cartwright, 'We Discuss Kinfolk's Redesign with Creative Director Charlotte Heal', *It's Nice That* (15 January 2015), no page.

25 'The Meaning of Light', *Kinfolk*, no. 14 (2014), 100–09.

26 Andreas Reckwitz, 'Practices and Their Affects', in *The Nexus of Practices: Connections, Constellations, Practitioners*, ed. by Allison Hui and Theodore Schatzki (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), pp. 114–25 (p. 123).

27 Cartwright, interview with Heal, no page.

28 Kress and Leeuwen, p. 357.

29 *Kinfolk*, 14, p. 100.



Fig. 2 'The Meaning of Light', *Kinfolk*, no. 22 (2014), 104–5; courtesy of Kinfolk

In the middle of the essay, the reader encounters a spread (Fig. 2) reproducing a diptych from Barth's *and of time* series (2000). The still life depicts the artist's living room with sofa and the window's reflection on the wall behind it. The arrangement and colour scheme of the image explore light and the nature of vision. The diptych captures the natural sheens, glares, shadows, and reflections that travel through our everyday habitats. The feature's impressionistic layering highlights temporal space differently — not as surfaces illuminated by beams of light, but as a quality of the space that surrounds us.

Scholars frequently read *Kinfolk's* success in terms of either an evolution of or a departure from the founding 2011 issue. Heal's creative vision certainly both refines *Kinfolk's* visual personality and endangers it. Birthing a culture of visual conformity made the magazine vulnerable to becoming indistinguishable from the growing number of minimalist magazines imitating *Kinfolk's* aesthetically pleasing print production. While Heal's art directorship is credited as a continuation of the magazine's philosophy with only slight changes in design and content, Alan Hunting's 2016 appointment is considered revolutionary, moving the magazine away from 'its roots and towards the aesthetic logic of fashion'.<sup>30</sup> I argue, however, that while *Kinfolk's* second redesign is less revolutionary, it reflects the dynamic spectrum of independent publishing observed over the last twenty years. Indie magazines like the British *Dazed & Confused* and *Kinfolk* have attained an increased market value and thus come close to a 'categorical tipping point [...] between the indie magazine and the magazine of mainstream'.<sup>31</sup> The second redesign is, therefore, not so much motivated by the necessity to reinvigorate the magazine's original philosophy, but rather expands the editorial focus in terms of a cultural journalism that engages, in words and images, with an international elite and their demanding aesthetics and ideals.

Issue twenty-two opens as a special issue on work and entrepreneurship, a topic of immense interest for the magazine's target group of creative professionals. The

30 Bean et al., p. 85.

31 Masurier, p. 393.



magazine features ‘Byredo’, a European luxury perfume brand founded in Stockholm in 2006 by Ben Gorham, a Swede born to an Indian mother and a Canadian father who grew up in Toronto, New York, and Stockholm. His ambition to translate memories and emotions into products and experiences matches *Kinfolk*’s philosophy. With his lumberjack shirts, tattoos, denim, and trainers, he looks like the antithesis to the image of a perfumer. In this sense, Gorham matches both the magazine’s original kinfolk type and its avant-garde taste.



Fig. 3 ‘Byredo’, *Kinfolk*, no. 22 (2016), 66–67; courtesy of Kinfolk

The entrepreneurial feature functions as a kind of native reporting that talks to participants in a cultural community of like-minded creative professionals. Norwegian photographer Lasse Fløde’s old school black and white photography frames the rags-to-riches story. The full bleed images on the succeeding pages give the entire piece a classic touch, ennobling Gorham’s singular lifestyle and pathway to wealth. The larger print and the coated paper accentuate the photographs’ attention to detail. The feature conveys the atmosphere of classical portrait sittings, with a clean focus and total — almost reverent — devotion to the subject. In this sense, the magazine returns to its ‘kinfolkish’ roots using the ‘technological alchemy’ of print to create a new sense of closeness and shared perceptions for this decade’s new urban middle class. The ‘Byredo’ piece also marks a transition in terms of the magazine’s indie-ness, prioritizing a style of storytelling that centres around designers, products, objects, and marketing. Heavily influenced by contemporary Nordic design, *Kinfolk* equates its social ethos of a better life with pure and minimalist forms.<sup>32</sup>

32 In an interview with Ilse Crawford for *Kinfolk*’s ‘Design Issue’, the British interior designer states: ‘That’s one response to society’s increasing speediness: making designs effective rather than efficient. We don’t want to waste time trying to do things, find things and make things happen when they’re completely unnecessary. At the same time, we don’t want to live like machines: We want to feel “at home”. We want to prioritize the unmeasurable stuff: things like atmosphere, tactility, beauty and comfort. These qualities slow you down; they really embed your body in a place’, ‘In Conversation: Ilse Crawford & Hugo Macdonald’, *Kinfolk*, no. 18 (2015), 54–57 (p. 54).

## Kinfolk's Indie Nordicness

As an independent magazine, *Kinfolk* intends to develop culture. In this respect, it is worth noting that *Kinfolk's* success is less dependent on its instagrammable aesthetics and the visual networking of social media; the magazine's expansion instead overlaps with the revivalism of Scandinavian lifestyle since 2006. Scandinavian design found a widespread appeal in the United States due to the 2012 exhibition *New Nordic: Architecture and Identity* held at the Louisiana State Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition not only explored rising global interest in Nordicness, but also shed new light on Scandinavian design, regional identity, and professional traditions and how these relate on a global level as an inevitable condition for humanity today. Establishing the lifestyle publishing company Ouur Media in 2013, *Kinfolk's* producers decided to join the huge network of architects, designers, journal editors, design critics, manufacturers, and salesmen in Denmark who promoted a new understanding of forms and values that moves beyond the 'cold' international standards of mid-century modernist design.<sup>33</sup> Skou and Munch assert that 'New Nordic might be considered a form of revivalism, like new gothic or new classicism, where the ideological figure is concerned with vitalizing the living essence of a tradition, rather than worshipping the "dead" historical forms'.<sup>34</sup> As investigations of consumers, objects, and brands show, Scandinavian design not only proposed another form of intelligibility for crafted products since its rise in the 1950s, but it also understood design as a cultural phenomenon that inspires contemplation about (regional) identity and self-presentation.<sup>35</sup> As such, its effectiveness lies in the co-branding of a democratic design and a minimalist aesthetic that has become rather international and progressive.

Likewise, the new Nordic Design culture that has spread in the opening years of the millennium is attached to cultural transformation. However, as Skou and Munch argue, the New Nordic performs a retro style that 'contains nostalgia for the good old, modern days' and addresses 'a somewhat narrower, more elitist segment of international consumers' that wants to engage with the ideal picture of neomodernist culture, sustainable products, and gourmet destinations.<sup>36</sup> *Kinfolk's* 2015 'Design Issue' illustrates how the magazine's gospel of essential living joined the neomodernist approach to form and value, explaining how:

In the rise of the homemade, the handmade, the craft-made and the self-made, there's this revival of the individual and the idea of creating a product that satisfies a particular use or user rather than the global population. In many cases, I think that's why we're returning to old processes, materials and methods of production. But we're also generating new ones that allow a similar approach to small-batch local productions — we're generating a new language and a new form of beauty in itself.<sup>37</sup>

33 The move to Copenhagen not only meant changes in infrastructure, but also in how to build an efficient organizational culture around the brand. For neomodernism and organizations, see John McAuley, Joanne Duberley, and Phil Johnson, *Organization Theory: Challenges and Perspectives* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007). The authors argue that 'neo-modernists are interested in the ways in which the values and beliefs of people shape and are shaped by their experience of organizational life. This leads to their interest in organizational culture, in the ways in which organizations "need" to be designed around people and in understanding processes of change' (p. 100).

34 Niels Peter Skou and Anders V. Munch, 'New Nordic and Scandinavian Retro: Reassessment of Values and Aesthetics in Contemporary Nordic Design', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, no. 8 (2016), 1–12 (p. 6); see also, Kjetil Fallan, ed., *Scandinavian Design: Alternative Histories* (London: Berg, 2013); Mussari, Mark, *Danish Modern: Between Art and Design* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

35 Benoît Heilbrunn, *Market Mediations: Semiotic Investigations on Consumers, Objects and Brands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); for the Scandinavian design boom and the Danish modern see Andrew Hollingworth, *Danish Modernism* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2008).

36 Skou and Munch, 11.

37 Joanna Han, 'As Told to: Max Lamb', *Design Issue, Kinfolk*, no. 18 (2015), 32–35 (p. 35).

Its relocation to Copenhagen in 2016 not only led to *Kinfolk's* redesign, but — inspired by the Scandinavian lifestyle — Nathan Williams and his team's new headquarters, offices, and gallery were designed by Danish firm Norm Architects to host events, exhibitions, talks, and workshops.<sup>38</sup> The magazine has also added a star-studded editorial board to its roster of contributors. The Danish designer and architect Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen, head of Norm Architects, has become a major influence on how the magazine sees itself as an innovative space that blends product design with Scandinavian 'norms' of simplicity, gracefulness, craftsmanship, and timelessness. Bjerre-Poulsen is not only one of the key players in Nordic design culture, but is also author of the manifesto 'Soft-Minimalism', promoting 'geometrical purity, uncomplicated naturalness and a sense of cool and calm' that bridges 'the masculine and the feminine', as the online magazine *Trendland* puts it.<sup>39</sup> The gender-balanced, transnational, pluriethnic middle-way of the New Nordic is translated into the magazine's print infrastructure by Christian Møller Andersen, who currently holds the position of art director at *Kinfolk* magazine and is known for work that mixes classical and modernist design principles. Entering the institutionalized Nordic design culture of stores, awards, events, and firms, *Kinfolk* echoes the revivalist perplexities of the New Nordic, 'furnishing' the magazine with retro-style brands, images, and stories. A good case in point is *Kinfolk's* 2019 'Education Issue'. This issue's opening section contains a spread featuring the '70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary' of the 'The Chieftain Chair' (Fig. 4), an iconic furniture design crafted by Finn Juhl (1912–89), who helped establish the Danish Modern as an international style in the 1940s.



Fig. 4 Advertisement, *Kinfolk*, no. 33 (2019), 4–5; courtesy of Kinfolk

38 Kate Levin, 'Trailblazers: Scandinavian Traditions at Norm Architects', *Creativepool* (12 December 2016), no page. There it says: 'The Kinfolk Gallery and office space was created in close dialogue with Nathan Williams and Jessica Gray from *Kinfolk*. With inspiration from both Scandinavian and Japanese design, the interior architecture is minimalist, but thoughtful with attention to every little detail. The colour palette consists of soothing, warm greys, white and black, mixed with fair wood and metals for contrast. Every single tone, nuance and material in the space has been carefully selected to create a harmonious and natural feel that is suited for the Kinfolk credo of slow living.'

39 Anna Canlas, 'Soft Minimalism by Menu (Denmark)', *Trendland* (7 July 2014), no page.

The double-page ad celebrates the chair's strict and timeless functionalism in both construction and materials. The caption on the opposite page underscores the chair's auratic dimension as an 'original' that 'never changes'. The branded content invites the reader to make connections with both the iconic object and the ways it is visually represented in the magazine's pages. The brand not only tells the story of Danish modern, but also merges *Kinfolk's* communal brand with the usefulness and durability of Nordic designs that are 'always geared towards practicality, taking into account the surrounding natural world and its resources'.<sup>40</sup> The opening ad mirrors an excerpt from *The Touch* — a book on contemporary design — reprinted in the middle of the issue. *The Touch: Spaces Designed for the Senses* (2019) is a collaboration between Nathan Williams, Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen, and Christian Møller Andersen.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to an increasingly saturated market, this book promotes a human-centric design that evolves around light, materiality, colour, nature, and community. The reprinted excerpt exemplifies how Italian designer Vincenzo de Cotiis's eighteenth-century Milanese home 'is an homage to his fascination with aging objects'.<sup>42</sup> The words that accompany Andersen's photography spell out *Kinfolk's* new editorial policy, positioning the magazine in the cultural context of international design avantgarde. According to the authors, De Cotiis's style is a 'combination of antique and futuristic elements, with materials marked by aged patinas or imperfect finishes. It is also mercurial: because of this easy access to beautiful objects'.<sup>43</sup> Like De Cotiis's interior design that 're-curates the [Milanese home's] apartment with new items for display', *Kinfolk* magazine 're-curates' the longing for singular objects as life-changing experiences.<sup>44</sup> It furnishes its pages with neomodernist stuff. Unlike other design indie magazines, like *Slanted*, that communicate an explicit political message, *Kinfolk* imagines a design of impact. In doing so, *Kinfolk* ultimately fuses its early neighbourly credo with an elitist design content to create spaces that make an international audience feel good in every way.

## Conclusion

Reading a lifestyle magazine is a way to learn about a specific way of life and participate in it at the same time. Unlike reading a newspaper, reading a lifestyle magazine is more of an aesthetic than a functional choice, a way of pursuing immediate interests like art, fashion, food, and good manners. Published as a quarterly by Ouur, *Kinfolk* includes print and digital media, translated international book editions, clothing lines, and community spaces to extend its ethos of 'putting creative collaboration at the heart of contemporary life'.<sup>45</sup> *Kinfolk* successfully cultivates its globally recognizable aesthetic

40 Dorothea Gundtoft, *New Nordic Design* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), p. 7.

41 Speaking of the Swedish concept of 'Lagom' (a 'harmonious balance point at which nothing more needs to be added or taken away', Bjerre-Poulsen claims that 'There is a pursuit of timelessness in all of our work. We talk about this a lot, as some people think it's utopian to create something timeless, given that everything connects to the period in which it was made. But more and more we're seeing a fast-paced approach to design, of the kind that we've seen for years in fashion. It changes all the time. People don't buy clothes because they need them; they buy them as a visual expression of their own identity. So it's more about culture, and less about need. In both design, architectural and interior works we try to do projects that are all about meeting real needs for humans. We'd much rather do something that's more quiet and withdrawn, but will be more durable — both in terms of aesthetics, and also in terms of using high-end materials that will actually last 10, 20, or 100 years.' See Ana Dorothea Ker, 'Living Lagom with Jonas Bjerre-Poulsen of Norm Architects', *Ignant* (27 September 2018), no page.

42 Gabrielle Dellisanti and Christian Møller Andersen, 'Excerpt: De Cotiis Residence', *Kinfolk*, no. 33 (2019), 76–85.

43 Dellisanti and Andersen, p. 79.

44 Dellisanti and Andersen, p. 79; Skou and Munch (p. 11) argue that the New Nordic ends up producing 'gourmet objects' that lack a 'larger cultural project for the objects to be part of'.

45 *Kinfolk*, no. 28 (2018), 193.

feel not so much by reproducing clichéd visual forms, but rather by offering redesigns that become necessary given the dialectical relationship between independent and mainstream sensibilities, as well as the magazine's intention to transcend the fluctuations of fashion. From its very beginnings as an independent magazine, *Kinfolk* had to cope not only with the rise of a new middle class and the economy of a singular lifestyle that goes along with it, but also with the question of how to remain the source of true life experience in a false world of excessive consumption driven by the rapid superficiality of capitalist pop culture. Looking over the number of issues printed since its first appearance in 2011, we observe that *Kinfolk* attempts to embed an aesthetic and ethical attitude within its pages in order to move with the times and to avoid losing momentum with an audience who cares about their quality of life without falling prey to fashion. In light of this, however, turning the magazine into an excessively harmonious and overly pleasing artefact runs the risk of feeling dated.

In the context of independent publishing today, *Kinfolk* shows no signs of slowing down. The print history of *Kinfolk* demonstrates that the magazine has gained momentum in an over-consumptive capitalist world where distinction is based less on ideology than on style and singularity. Independent magazines like *Kinfolk* are, therefore, 'multipiece invitations to invest in temporary and imaginary identities'.<sup>46</sup> The magazine's closeness to Ouur Media, launched by Nathan Williams in 2013, leverages the aesthetics of the magazine to produce publications, videos, and installations.<sup>47</sup> This multi-brand distribution is a powerful tool that influences middle-class consumer culture worldwide. *Kinfolk* has become the brand name for a lifestyle empire that performs advanced aesthetic communication, becoming part of a network of design firms and creative services that create brand identities, content, websites, and printed matter. The producers do not simply publish a magazine; they also act as editors, selecting well-known designers and creative minds who provide *Kinfolk* with good stories to promote the brand's trademark of mindfulness and slow living. Moreover, *Kinfolk* has co-created close partnerships with leading interior brands, such as the Danish design company Muuto, and organizes countless international events such as exhibitions, pop-up shops, guest lectures, fashion showings, workshops, dinner gatherings, and film and photo shoots. As Jerney Leslie points out, independent magazines are able to develop successful business models, recognizing *Kinfolk's* marketing and public outreach as an 'enormously powerful [tool]. People buy into the brand explicitly and they want the full Kinfolk experience. It doubles back into the magazine and makes them money along the way.'<sup>48</sup>

One can only speculate on the magazine's future. Since its launch in 2011, *Kinfolk* has been at the head of a print renaissance in an increasingly digital world. The magazine functions as a diary, a memoir, and a travelogue of new forms of connections between people and things. The kinfolk experience is certainly more than healthy breakfasts and latte. It rather illustrates today's predominant aspirational lifestyle that 'doubles back' into the magazine's pages. In the age of swipeable screens, memes, and selfies, the magazine's print aesthetics strives to offer an alternative global perspective. *Kinfolk* curates a lifestyle that proposes to rescue the world from the ills of manipulation and compulsive conformity; the magazine's mission to re-energize peoples' way of living stages a world that has never existed. Because there is no world free of money and consumption, *Kinfolk* magazine attempts to salvage Theodor Adorno's epigram that

46 Joke Hermes, *Reading Women's Magazines* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 64.

47 See Ouur Media's [website](#).

48 Jeremy Leslie, quoted in Laura Isabella Matthews, 'How Do Independent Magazines Make Money?' *BOF* (23 July 2015), no page.



‘There is no true life within a false life’, only to fail, however, in providing larger cultural conceptions behind its human-centric design and its promise to ‘provide a richer quality of living’.<sup>49</sup> *Kinfolk* ultimately addresses the longings of an elite audience of creative professionals and bespeaks their nostalgic desire for a true life within the false life of a global culture industry.

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<sup>49</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflection on a Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Routledge, 1974); ‘Introducing The Touch’, *Kinfolk*, no. 33 (2019), 192.

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