Secrecy and meatballs

By Norbert Hirschhorn
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You emerge from the dark parking lot into the sunlight of the blue and yellow boxy building, familiar and comforting in nearly 300 stores around the world, including a recent one adjacent to the Mall of America. The entrance lobby has a safe play area for children. You are invited to take a paper tape measure; a wood pencil; a slip to record furniture serial numbers and shelf locations; a big, yellow environment-friendly bag to stuff little purchases (stocking stuffers in this season) that you hadn't known you needed, and that wonderful free catalogue almost as popular as the Bible. Welcome to Ikea. In Swedish, it's pronounced EE-KAY-A, in English EYE-KEE-A. The word comes from the initials of 84-year-old founder Ingvar Kamprad and where he's from, Elmtaryd, a farm near the Swedish village of Agunnaryd. Ikea is owned by foundations and trusts, controlled by the Kamprad family.
Ingvar (as everyone calls him) was already at age 5 an ambitious and supremely confident entrepreneur, buying cheap matches and trinkets in bulk, and selling them individually at a low price. This became the Ikea model applied to basic furniture that customers pick up, take home and assemble themselves, the so-called "flat pack" approach (though help can be purchased). And if you don't need furniture, there are textiles, bedroom and bath items, storage, home decorations, lighting, energy-efficient light bulbs, and batteries in bulk. Every time a new store opens crowds swarm at the entrance, begging to buy.

Now ride up the elevator and enter the cafeteria where you can feed a family for not much money and drink refills are free. My wife loves the Swedish meatballs; she'd go to any Ikea store in the world just for them. (Local customs are observed — in Istanbul they serve porkless kofta.) By the time you are ready to go shopping, your "wallet is open," in the words of an Ikea executive. In every corner lie bins full of stocking stuffers, household items that just have to be useful, someday if not now. It's all about the household for people with small budgets, small spaces and simple needs — no Chippendale or Louis the Fourteenth here.

No matter which store you visit on the planet, the layout is familiar. You are pushed along by the mass of shoppers, "guided" by a one-way marked pathway winding through a maze around and around, exposing you to every one of the thousands of items designed and produced by hundreds of suppliers. Yes, there are shortcuts, but only the Ikea-savvy shopper knows them; the rest of us are distracted and disoriented. (You can shop on-line to avoid the confusion.) It's a billion dollar business, and it's all about selling: go into the toilet and in the stall is a nice looking toilet brush, with a sign nearby telling you where to buy one just like it.

There are dark sides to this miracle of marketing and logistics. What is inexpensive and simple to some is cheaply made junk to others. Lucy Kellaway, management consultant for the Financial Times, reported that "Ikea, the most successful furniture retailer the world has ever seen, is famous for building customer despair.... It makes you walk for miles, queue for ages and then find that the legs to the table are not in stock and there is no staff member to help. Then you queue again to buy a whole lot of stuff that you don't want. Finally, you have despair all over again when you get the stuff home and set to work with the Allen wrench."

The forced march, the marketing feel to me Orwellian. It may be just coincidence, or not, that Ingvar Kamprad once belonged to a fascist youth movement. Last year a 20-year veteran executive named Johan Stenebo, about to be let go, published the whistle-blower book, "The Truth About Ikea." The book

describes in admiring terms the management model that has made Ikea what it is today. However, Stenebo alleges that where Ingvar was once a brilliant strategist, encouraging creative thinking, now at age 84 he is secretive and suspicious. The company has become bureaucratic, the executives fearful; company spies inform on others. (Last month, perhaps as a result of the revelations, Ikea reported its profits for the first time in the company's 67-year history.)

When Ingvar leaves the scene, the eldest of three sons, Peter, is destined to take over. Stenebo resigned when Peter informed him over some trivial matter, "I have no confidence in you any longer, Johan." If we take only part of Stenebo's version as true, Ikea reminds me of an Empire, the aging Emperor about to hand over power to the Prince. "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It's in You and in the Situation," wrote our American poet Robert Frost.

I own two nice bentwood chairs, a small drop-leaf dining table, low-energy bulbs, paper lanterns, batteries, kitchen cabinets, a potted gardenia, storage boxes, bedding, mats, and what else - all from Ikea. Now where did I put that Allen wrench?

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