I come from a tradition where people depend on themselves and their own abilities to solve their own problems, and not so much on designers abilities to save the day. The design tradition is to a large degree a tradition of intermediate structures, improvised and subjective. The user and the maker is often the same person. The user is the one who knows the problems the best, and therefore the person most able to solve them. This contradicts, among other things, the ideas of standardisation and mass production.

This area is called Sápmi.
One could call the part of the Sámi design tradition that is based on improvisation “primitive design.” “Primitive design”, as it is basic, somewhat pre-industrial and therefore non-institutionalised and uncomplicated, is a very accessible design.
“Improvised” can be a tiny bit misleading. Structures like these are not always made in the spur of the moment. They can be planned, thought of, and require skills - but so do musical improvisations. They are made, time- and site specific, with skills and materials at hand, and according to their surroundings. The competence of improvisation is apparent in how and what is created.
What categorizes the structures I'm referring to is this: they are vernacular, the maker and the user are often the same person, they solve a problem, they often consist of re-used parts, they are seldom very technological, and they can be changed by the user. Vernacular structures like these exist all over the world and are not exclusive to the Sámi design tradition, but this makes them no less part of the Sámi culture.
Admittedly, this is not a tradition that leaves traces for archeologists. As a tradition it has left more traces in the attitude than in the landscapes. The physical remnants are the few, larger ones: storages and buildings, bricolages of previous storages, old boat parts, covered with flattened tin cans and birch bark, and similarities.
Being able to improvise with what is at hand, has always been an important part of Sámi culture, both within the nomadic and the settled groups. This is by all means not specific only to Sámi tradition, and this is not what makes Sámi culture stand out as opposition to the Norwegian, Swedish, Kvæn, Russian or Finnish cultures of the rural north. Rather, this is something shared.
I have always understood this way of thinking as our design tradition. However, when presenting ourselves to the outside/non-Sámi/south, we normally highlight duodji, the craft: elaborate, time-consuming and complicated objects from the craft traditions. In the history between Sámi and the colonial forces, Sámi have often been described as lazy, under-developed and illiterate. Presenting duodji as the driving force in the Sámi design tradition is a way to correct that allegation.
This attitude and competence for improvisation is very important in a culture where people travel, migrate, are exposed to harsh weather, often find themselves far away from shops, institutions and roads, and have cultural specific needs to small to be handled by the market forces. You don't sit down and wait for something to show up in the shop, as the likelihood of a designer somewhere far away coming up with a solution for how to stop your reindeer crossing over to the next district when snowdrifts get to high, is un-promising. You fix. You take advantage of connections and the skills people you know possesses. You don't always invent, if your neighbour has a good solution for this, but often you also invent.
The Kobbholmen pier consists of spare parts and leftovers. The rail is made of window sills from when the local hotel was damaged in a fire some years ago, the blue barrels used to contain fire extinguishing foam used at drills at the airport, and there are some aluminium studs in the middle of the construction taken from sponsored, over sized football goals at the children's football field: the goals were downsized by some fathers and the spare parts reused in this pier. They still bear the logo of the bank who sponsored the making of the football pitch.
Theory on indigenous design often promotes the local and direct economical advantages of developing a sustainable, local and indigenous design, however, this does not easily transfer to Sámi design. This improvised part of the Sámi design tradition does not generate money to Sámi society, neither is Sámi society dependent on small scale producers producing traditional crafts for the market. The impact is rather a personal and a cultural one, connected to independence.
Boel Christensen-Speel talks about the proximity to the means of production, “not simply (as) a Marxist blast from the past- it is a description of human survival strategies in an age when the management of materials is normally greatly removed from us and likely to remain so”. She has an art/artist perspective on this, still valid for the designers work. She argues, through the words of Nicolas Bourriaud, that in evaluating indigenous cultures, we must accept all expressions equally worth of blame and praise “in terms of central and dominant contemporary discourse.” This is to enable us to use the craft, skills and perspectives to recover a closer contact with the aesthetic process of production. Borriaud argues that unless we accept the diversity of expressions, the art (and my claim, design, as it is related to crafts and skills) of other cultures will “take on appearance of greater foreignness and cultural dependence”. Controlling your own means fosters independence. The use of “aesthetics”, in “aesthetic process of production“ might sound shallow in a design context, but the aesthetic outcome is very much part of the independence in the production of these improvised structures.
When observing indigenuity (or vernacular structures in general), I suspect that it often exists a bit between spheres. Take the yard, for instance. It is between indoors and outdoors, and it is also locked between work and recreation, the same way a cabin is in the northern culture. You go there for leisure, but also to fish, pick berries and hunt. These sites are also between the wild and the cultivated. Most prominent, without any thought of places, are what comes into existence as something intermediate, that becomes permanent. Something you fix, and it works so well that you keep it. One of the challenges for me as a designer is to find a way to transfer this immediacy from between spheres into everyday life, everywhere: to make it available.
I will argue that design is something someone intended to use as or for something. An intention carried out. My claim to this definition is no stronger, nor weaker, than my own role as a designer. I am a designer, and this is what design means. I have come to this conclusion through my work with, and commitment to, vernacular structures, and I have worked with vernacular structures because I perceive them as design.
This instant solving of a problem is not what a designer does. The designer often makes the product without having experienced the problem. Indeed, there might even not be a problem, other than the fact that the designer needs to earn her money somehow. Form and shape is very much a part of the designers training. But not only. We like to think of ourselves as saviours of the human race, solvers of problems. We might be, but we are also decorators. And we acutely become the decorator when improvised design like this steps up next to ours in the limelight.
Leaving out any demands of approved or authorized visuals makes producing solutions like this easy and accessible. Another obvious potential here is the sustainability aspect. Self made structures do not acquire much transportation, the materials are re-used, often several times. Objects have several life cycles, in various roles. They can be assembled and re-assembled again and again. All materials are resources, very little is waste. The process of making is efficient with very little loss of material, as opposed to factory produced
I've wanted to promote the potential of the primitive. The greater advantages of this, the way I see it, is the independence from a designer, the adaption of a mind set where you fix your own problems with the materials and skills at hand. The cultural independence is most important, and with this, personal independence. This is the potential.
Also in their permanent state, these primitive structures are dynamic. The person making the structure is often also the person that uses it. This enables him or her to change it according to new or changed needs, realizations of how this wasn’t such a great way to fix this after all, changing conditions, and so forth. Also in the cases where creator and user are different persons, the user will often be able to make changes, because of the primitive nature of the object.