



Industrial Designer, a Modernist Hero?

by dora sapunar

Design has consistently been framed as an answer, solution or at least a contributing factor to issues and changes in the social sphere. One of the key moments in which design became a crucial political tool was in the early years of the Cold War (1947-1960). The regimes looked to designers to propagate visions of their respective ideologies and the life-styles which these ideologies had the potential of generating. The war was not waged on a battlefield, but took shape in the construction of design solutions: the variety of gleaming American appliances implied individual freedom of expression, while the longevity of standardized Soviet machinery suggested equality and stability in that region. Yugoslavia, as a non-aligned country, attempted to provide a third solution to this political dichotomy, one where design would be egalitarian but not repressive; one that would promote rational consumption but would not be blindly dependent on fashion. Although embedded in a singular historical context, considering the position of industrial design in mid-century Yugoslavia might help increase our understanding of the broader role of design and its ties to the political sphere.

Following the Second World War, Yugoslavia experienced a period of rapid development. There was an increased understanding that the future of design lay in industry. Industrial



FIGURE 1 Article on the proper place for ornament from a 1959 issue of the magazine 15 Days (15 dana). Image taken by Dora Sapunar.

In a time when designed objects were still often seen as products of two different spheres—the world of engineering, which provided the object's functional character; and the art world, in developing the objects' outward appearance—industrial design appeared as a way of combining these two in a manner fitting for the rapid changes the society was undergoing. It is no wonder, then, that the question of the role of design in the fifties began as a question of terminology. Hardly an issue of Yugoslavia's renowned architecture and design magazines¹ was published without an inquiry into the role of industrial design. Consider the titles of some key articles such as: "Definition and Social Significance of Industrial Design,"²

design—a rising field whose implications were yet to be defined—was imbued with great social responsibility, as its successes and failures were set to be replicated hundreds and thousands of times. Industrial design objects were believed to embody the social intent of the designer, as well as political and social ideologies, and in turn become, themselves, arbiters of proper living.



FIGURE 2 Article on the connection between art and industry by designer Niko Kraji. Image taken by Dora Sapunar.



FIGURE 2 Article on industrial esthetics from the magazine Architecture (Arhitektura). Image taken by Dora Sapunar.

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“Industrial Artist, and the Acute Need for One,”³ “On the Terms and Definitions in the Field of Industrial Arts.” The goal of the articles was to define the new discourse of design, as well as its position in Yugoslavia.⁴

On a practical level, products of industrial design were intended to help achieve greater efficiency in both the household and the workplace. Writers lauded new material developments in plastics and metals and new advances in domestic appliances such as refrigerators and high-pressure cookers. By being simple, functional and effective, industrial products were thought to be able to provide an easier life for their users.

However, there was another reason why Yugoslavian designers of the time preferred plain and durable materials such as plastic and metal.⁵ In their “practical beauty,”⁶ they were seen as manifestations of both the industrial advancements of the country and the ideology of socialist life that rejected the accumulation of unnecessary decoration. Industrial design was seen as the perfect embodiment of ideological concerns. The idea was that increased efficiency on a mass scale could in turn make a society more egalitarian. For instance, making household chores easier would allow women to participate both in the private and the public sphere.

Designers in Yugoslavia saw a key difference between their approach to industrial design and the one taken by designers in capitalist countries. This was their creation of products with the goal of longevity, in contrast to the planned obsolescence they

observed in the West. Despite the increased efforts of American designers to create simple, affordable products, in many situations the role of the designer was still reduced to that of a decorator, tasked solely with fashioning an appealing surface in accordance with the latest trends. In one of his articles, the famous Yugoslavian architect and designer Bernardo Bernardi criticized the continued popularity of Streamline Moderne in household objects, as well as the colorfulness of contemporary appliances. In their dissociation from the functional he found them no better than the kitsch of period furniture.⁷

Instead of decrying the autonomy of industrial design, young Yugoslavian designers advocated a blurring of boundaries between design, art and engineering in shaping new products. This separated them from the strict insistence on unadorned functionalism found in other socialist contexts. The aesthetic element remained important as the scale of production increased. These synthesizing tendencies were disseminated through architecture and design schools, and reached a broader audience through discussions in the media—from newspapers and television shows, to national fairs. In the end, many of these expectations of industrial design never came to full fruition. Industrial design and its products remained at the mercy of economic and social factors, rather than acting as independent harbingers of change. Despite efforts on all sides, the connection between manufacturers, designers and the public remained fraught with problems. However, the efforts to define and understand the implications of industrial design allowed the discipline to become a key, though not singular, component of the cultural and political fabric of the country, and one that was to have a profound influence on the country’s future developments.

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