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The Other Design History**

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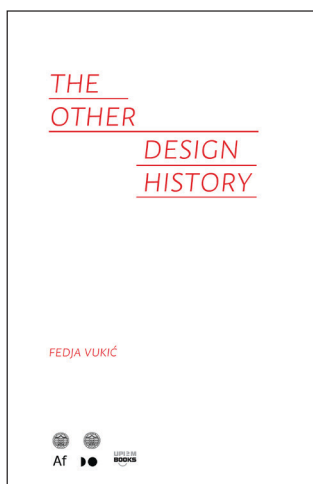
Book Review: The Other Design History

by Ksenija Berk

Design from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has long been an uncharted territory in the world history of design. Readers are rarely presented with research on the history of design from this once important political player and founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement—now dissolved into six nation states, of which Croatia is one. Fedja Vukić, who teaches design history and theory at the University of Zagreb, Croatia, devotes much of his book, *The Other Design History*, to the industrial production of Croatia between the 1950s and 1990s. More specifically, Vukić focuses on several ideas present in different industrial design publications published in Croatia from the beginning of the 1950s to the late 1980s—primarily in architectural and design magazines, newspapers, and exhibition catalogues.

What does the book's provocative title reveal to the audience regarding the notion of the “other design history”? In this case, the notion of the other is not reserved for radical, critical, counter-hegemonic, or anti-colonial discourse, but

Book Title: The Other Design History
Author: Fedja Vukić
Publisher: Upi-2m Books
Publication Date: 2015
ISBN 9789537703288



rather for a history of design within a larger framework of industrial history, which has left the design from the former Yugoslavia practically untouched.

The Other Design History is roughly organized into three parts (two chapters and a visual supplement), which cover different issues, such as the relationship between historical context, industrial form, and meaning; the relationship between design and industrial production; and a brief mention of the broader political context.

In the first part of the book the author explains the ambiguous nature of design in relation to industrial production in different Yugoslavian republics. Vukić argues that Croatia and Slovenia were significantly more developed in terms of economic growth, regardless of the fact that they both belonged to the same economic, social, and political system as the other republics. The book attempts to analyze some aspects of industrial production in Croatia, such as internationalization and modernization, reforms in the socialist economy, traveling abroad,

and the liberalization of the cultural sphere. What is more, Vukić sketches the institutional, historical, social, and political context within which Croatian industrial design developed as a field after World War II and until the dissolution of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s.



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The second part of the book begins with an analysis of the discursive disparity between the terms design and form-giving in a Croatian context. I would argue that the recent emphasis on this differentiation, which Vukić explains in detail, can be understood as a symptom of a widespread effort to come to terms with different histories of design on a more local level. This approach has largely been adopted from the German design tradition, which was highly influential on design production in Yugoslavia, especially in the 1960s. Many of the West German (BRD) industrial standards and ideas in industrial design were directly transmitted and adapted to the Yugoslavian context. Another vivid example is the influence of Braun and the Ulm School of Design on the design of small household appliances, high-tech, and the automobile industry. This dichotomy, between form-giving and design, varies according to different languages of the former Yugoslavian republics. In my opinion, it is more a linguistic nuisance than a reflection of actual design practices in Yugoslavia. However, in order to get a more accurate picture of this issue, it should be addressed not only by design historians, but also by experts in linguistics, contemporary history, anthropology, and cultural politics. Regardless, what is of particular importance in this chapter is Vukić's emphasis on several public initiatives and co-operations

between designers and social organizations, which emerged to solve the pervading issues of housing and urbanization.

The third and final part of the book consists of several reproductions of posters, catalogue covers, architecture and design magazines, which give us a taste of what Croatian design looked like in this period. Although visually arresting, the meaning of this material remains hidden from readers who are not familiar with the Croatian language since there is no translation of the content. Although Vukić is a skilled writer and design historian, the content of his book too—bursting at the seams with historical data, people, places and events—might confuse a reader who is not an expert in the cultural and political history of the former Yugoslavia.

In a fifty-page pocket-size format, Vukić offers a very condensed reading on a wide array of topics: from an analysis of Yugoslavia's lack of critical theory of design, unanalyzed writings from the 30-year period, the influence of the Ulm School and German design, the changes in design paradigms caused by the changes in the economic system of the 1960s, to the various design events, magazines, and the influence of celebrity international designers, who left more than just a visible trace on design in Croatia.

Given the relative epigrammatic structure of *The Other Design History* it is obvious that it is far from being a detailed or comprehensive study. In fact, the book offers several points of departure for a more extensive study of design in the former socialist Yugoslavia. A daunting task, which Vukić sets aside for another occasion or researchers to come. Nevertheless, the book offers a valuable overview of important events that constitute the historical narrative of Croatian industrial design between the 1950s and the 1990s. ■

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