

# Theory and Practice of the Object: Niko Kralj Retrospective at the Museum of Architecture and Design in Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Several years ago, *Newsweek* magazine published an editorial on “cool” chairs from around the world in the editorial Design Watch by Richard Clayton which included in the list the Rex chair by Slovenian designer Niko Kralj, describing it as “the Iron Curtain classic.” That the design project, created only in the nineteen-fifties has been designated a “classic” raises two issues: first, the importance of the ideological and cultural changes since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and second, the deeper mechanisms of cultural models in contemporary consumer civilization. Everything—any object—has a potential “iconic” value and could, as such, be commercialized, including projects or objects created in the political and economic environment that, until recently, has been completely contrary to the liberal economy. Even if Kralj had not designed anything else but the proverbial Rex chair, he would have been included in any encyclopedia of contemporary design. However, he has designed a great deal more besides, and the exhibition in the Ljubljana Museum of Architecture and Design is dedicated precisely to that fact.

The curators of the exhibition, Barbara Predan and Spela Subic, rightly named it “The Known Unknown Designer” because Niko Kralj (now this point is clear, as the exhibition and its comprehensive catalogue document so well) is the seminal author who played a crucial role in the development of furniture design in Slovenia, both as a designer and a thinker.

The exhibition presents the designer’s work through individual projects—mainly chairs and system furniture—thus, clearly positioning Kralj’s projects through the timeline. The object-time continuum is important because it helps visitors to understand Kralj’s position in the broader context of the culture of socialism and public promotion of industrial design of the time. Continuous efforts were made to implement a systematic strategy for the design of industrial products in the planned economy during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in Slovenia and Croatia; Kralj, with his projects and ideas, was an indispensable part of this trend. Because Slovenia and Croatia, at that time, were part of the



Figure 1  
Exhibition set-up showing some of the most known produced pieces by Niko Kralj.

same political and economic context, evaluating Kralj's influence and the meaning of his individual projects has been possible—first, from the perspective of their effect within that context, and then, from the perspective of social values of a now nonexistent context and its culture.

The Rex chair is not just an accidental emblem of Kralj's work: It was massively present in everyday life as an important contribution to the lifestyle and the culture of work in the 1950s and 1960s (see Figure 1). During the era of self-management socialism during these two decades, plenty of efforts were undertaken to improve the quality of life, and Niko Kralj was a participant in major public events of that type in Yugoslavia, starting from the activist exhibition, "Housing for Our Conditions," in Ljubljana in 1956. These public initiatives fostered the philosophy and social sense of industrial design as it was then practiced in Slovenia and Croatia in the South Slav federation: the need to respond simultaneously to tasks of industrial modernization, but also to humanize public and private space. Such were the fundamental strategic development ideas on industrial design at that time.

The exhibition begins in a witty manner: Three of best known and most popular of the designer's chairs are set up so that every visitor can sit and have the "experience" of design, displayed in a broader context within two exhibition halls. This move provides an effective expansion of the museum experience because Kralj himself was opposed to an academic design approach and understood design activity more as a sort of humanistic activism. The exhibition then follows up with a detailed timeline of the author's work, and presents projects with all the available



Figure 2  
Furniture system Futura, Niko Kralj, 1973.

materials: drawings, models, prototypes, realized serial products, and where possible, the promotional photos. The exhibits are divided into two groups: Kralj's industrial objects with related documentation, and his experiments within the Institute for Design from the mid-1960s on (see Figure 2). A large number of projects for mass production, beginning in the 1950s and continuing onward, clearly have added a significant cultural value to the identity and experience of everyday life in Slovenia, and then to the entire socialist federation. Flats, schools, offices, public buildings—most of them were equipped with Kralj's furniture. The part of the exhibition that includes the exhibits demonstrating the author's experimental studies then complements the first part because it refers to the creative methods that combine engineering and technical skills with the general humanistic attitude of the author.

A great number of trade and theoretical texts, collected and published in the exhibition catalogue, further develop the author's profile. This picture presents a less known, or rather, an almost forgotten, Kralj: the thinking designer and activist, at times almost a philosopher, who always displayed a clearly concentrated focus on the user and the user's relation to the designed object. The author's theory and practice of object here becomes quite clear: Good design generates a functional unit that should always be thought of as a part of a larger system, both material and symbolic. This way of thinking applies both to objects and to social relations and values.

In the introductory essays of the richly illustrated catalogue, the curators of the Ljubljana exhibition rightly point to the modernist worldview of the author: Kralj was educated in this spirit of human/object interaction and had the opportunity to study and live in different countries, including in the United States (1963–1964 as a scholar of the Ford Foundation) and in Israel (1968–1969 as an expert advisor to the United Nations for the development of industrial products). Well-informed and cosmopolitan in perspective, Kralj had dedicated most of his life and career to the local community at a time when the wave of industrial modernization had developed a new type of social relation. The designs of Niko Kralj cannot be fully understood outside the context of socialist modernization, and the authors of the exhibition rightly claim that only now, after having collected the basic facts on his work, can the in-depth research begin.