

Design Theory in Slovenia: Mapping the Field

Barbara Predan

English translation: Rawley Grau

In Slovenia,¹ the beginnings of design theory as a professional discipline go back to 1951, with the first publication of the journal *Arhitekt*, which, over the next thirteen years, regularly published texts on the topic of design.² In the academic year 1960–1961, at the initiative of architect Edvard Ravnikar,³ the so-called “B course” in design studies was instituted at the Faculty of Architecture, but it lasted for only two years. In 1964, the first issue of the journal *Sinteza* appeared, continuing the work of *Arhitekt*.⁴ That same year, in Ljubljana, the International Biennial of Industrial Design (or BIO, from its Slovene name *Bienale za industrijsko oblikovanje*) was organized for the first time.⁵ In 1966, the rise of graphic design in Slovenia received affirmation when the ICOGRADA Congress was held here, only three years after the organization’s founding in London. In hopes of reestablishing a design program at the Faculty of Architecture, Edvard Ravnikar, in 1969, wrote the treatise *Design*, a work that today is considered the first scholarly text to treat the issues of design theory in Slovenia in a thorough way. Alongside such developments in the area of design theory, we also can see during this same period the first achievements of Slovene industrial design—the work of the designers Niko Kralj, Albert Kastelic, Oskar Kogoj, and Sasa J. Mächtig are particularly outstanding. But despite such achievements, in his treatise, Ravnikar describes the complexity of the issue when he says, “No one has yet managed to prove that design is something entirely separate — that it is, then, neither architecture nor art nor any other particular form of technique.”⁶ According to Ravnikar, we can hardly speak of design as a new profession, since this discipline transcends even the basic principles of a profession.⁷ From today’s perspective, such doubt about design as a profession is surprising, but when we examine the professional writing published at the time, we find regular appeals about the need for strategically incorporating design into the social space.⁸

The present essay reviews a selection of texts on design theory published in the Slovene periodical press since the middle of the previous century. Special emphasis also is given to Ravnikar’s treatise. I hope through this research to contribute to the further mapping of the design field, which, as Victor Margolin notes, is one of the important tasks of design studies.⁹

- 1 On the basis of a plebiscite, Slovenia proclaimed its independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on June 25, 1991. In my essay, I examine texts published since 1950 in what was then called the Socialist Republic of Slovenia.
- 2 Prior to *Arhitekt*, there was another magazine in Slovenia called *Arhitektura*, which was published in the 1930s. It touched on design topics indirectly.
- 3 Edvard Ravnikar (1907–1993) was an architect, urban planner, designer, teacher, and writer. He is the leading figure in Slovene architecture after Joze Plecnik.
- 4 After appearing for thirteen years, the magazine *Arhitekt* joined with *Likovne besede* [Art Words] to form a new magazine, *Sinteza*. This magazine ran until 1994.
- 5 The organization for the Biennial of Industrial Design was founded in 1963. The first biennial was held in Ljubljana in 1964.
- 6 Edvard Ravnikar, “Design” (unpublished dissertation, Ljubljana, 1969): 75.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 8 Stane Bernik, “Poskus opredelitve vloge inovacij v oblikovalskem procesu” [“An Attempt to Define the Role of Innovations in the Design Process”], *Sinteza* 36–37 (1976): 131–132.
- 9 Victor Margolin, “Introduction,” in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism*, Victor Margolin, ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 6.

The Development of Theory in the Periodical Press

In the first issue of *Arhitekt*, the editor, France Ivansek,¹⁰ published an article entitled “Design in Industry*.” The asterisk in the title referred to the note: “Compiled on the basis of foreign literature.”¹¹ In this way, he indicated the terminological problems involved with naming a new discipline that had never before been an object of discussion in Slovenia. In his text, Ivansek, very likely for the first time, explains the concept of design to the professional public:

When speaking of the design of industrially manufactured objects, we are not talking about toying around with them or aestheticizing them. Rather, we are talking about a study of principles closely linked to the notion of quality, which obliges the designer to understand correctly the purpose of the object and, with this in mind, to design it correctly, using the right materials and handling the materials appropriately, so as to achieve the right solution in actuality (and not just to simulate it) in a formal and a technical respect, and also to provide the object with a pleasing appearance in form and color.¹²

The many pioneering steps taken in the 1950s by the magazine *Arhitekt* are well illustrated, too, in its publication of writings by recognized foreign theoreticians and practitioners in the field of design. Among the most influential foreign theories in the 1950s and 1960s, the reflections of Max Bill are particularly notable. In his text “The Basis and Aims of Aesthetics in the Machine Age,” Bill draws a clear distinction between decorators and designers. The word “beautiful” he labels as a “much too vague argument to serve as the starting point in a discussion of ‘industrial design,’” a statement he later explains as follows:

The basis is neither form nor function. The basis is need, human need. The functions that assume forms are defined so as to fulfill human needs. But to attain this fulfillment of needs unity is required in all functions that become form. ... I think that I have sufficiently designated the aim of production by saying that it is the fulfillment of human needs. If we acknowledge this aim to be the foundation of all creativity, does it then become at the same time identical with the purpose and aim of aesthetics? Not entirely. Since in the broader view, the basic goal of aesthetic influence is not merely the “fulfillment of human needs,” but rather to provide life as a whole with a more harmonious, more beautiful and more cheerful foundation, with meaning.¹³

One of the more important causes regularly discussed in the pages of *Arhitekt* was the question of the need for professional training. Ravnikar’s first attempted to introduce “B course” studies in the area of design at the Faculty of Architecture in 1960. After this

10 France Ivansek is an architect, writer, and researcher in the field of contemporary domestic culture.

11 France Ivansek, “Oblikovanje v industriji,” *Arhitekt* 1 (1951): 26–29. The “foreign literature” that Ivansek summarizes in his text is Anthony Bertram’s *Design*.

12 Ibid., 26.

13 Max Bill, “Osnova in cilj estetike v stoletju strojev,” *Arhitekt* 14 (1954): 20–22.

program had been in operation for a year, Majda Dobravc, in an article entitled “The Training of Industrial Designers,” observed, “This experimental year is significant for another reason, as well; it is intended to serve as the basis for the development of a design studies program in architecture, which we have never had before. Even today, the work of an architect extends into various design fields, but there is an extremely noticeable void, particularly in the design of industrial products, which is a consequence of the fact that we have no advanced school of industrial design.”¹⁴ The news of the program’s termination appeared a year later. Nevertheless, Ravnikar continued to lecture on design in his seminar. He explains in detail his vision and directives for a design studies program in the final chapters of his officially unpublished dissertation *Design*. The result of his lectures is a second postwar generation of architecture students who go on to make a visible and significant step forward in the field (Sasa J. Mächtig and Peter Skalar).

Ravnikar’s *Design*

When reading Ravnikar’s treatise on design, we cannot help noticing a kind of ambivalence in his treatment of certain key questions. We can deduce the first instance of a double stance in Ravnikar’s view, mentioned above, that rejects the idea of design as a discipline in itself. Initially, it seems that Ravnikar sees design as a part of architecture, but this idea soon changes, since as he refers to design as a vast and unsystematic field in which many disciplines tend to, as Ravnikar says, “contribute their own coloring.” And he adds: “Architect, artist, engineer, inventor, sociologist, psychologist, salesman, and journalist— all vie with each other for the right to take the lead in this domain so that, increasingly, it looks as if design cannot at all be a distinct discipline in today’s sense of the word, but is rather a field of activity for competing forces with a wide range of interests. Any attempt at definition must seem deficient to other interested parties, which means that we are always looking, again and again, for some final solution and definition in regard to questions about the status, working range, and formation of this new profession.” Ravnikar concludes his thought with the statement: “Given this, it seems that the only thing still needed is the general recognition of this new discipline.”¹⁵ Addressing the question of whether design is an art, he identifies certain ambiguities, which were (and still are) characteristic of both the world at large and Yugoslavia (and Slovenia) in particular. He writes: “In the quite modest (from a comparative perspective) conditions of our country, the empirical or, to put it better, artisan mentality still carries a lot of weight, so that the relationship between art and design is suggested in the common etymological root *lik* [meaning “figure, shape”—Trans.] in the terms *likovna umetnost* [“visual art”] and *oblik-ovanje* [“design”]. Although, in this imagined dependency, there is nothing in common between these notions, we persist in cling-

14 Majda Dobravc, “Vzgoja industrijskih oblikovalcev. Ob reformi studija na ljubljanski soli za arhitekturo” [“The Training of Industrial Designers: On the Reform of the Program at the Ljubljana School of Architecture”], *Arhitekt 3* (1961): 33–35.

15 Ravnikar, *Design*, 8.

ing to them and are always trying to deduce from this relationship some far-reaching criteria for evaluating things and determining their social role.”¹⁶ These thoughts remind us of the debates led by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the twentieth century, when Morris fought for making crafts equal to art and for putting an end to the distinction between the applied and the fine arts. As Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz points out, in the nineteenth century, utilitarian products were considered to be lacking a certain intellectual or spiritual element in comparison with a symphony, for example. These objects were viewed more as the work of the hand rather than the mind, and so were not considered to be art, at least not pure art.¹⁷ We still find similar theoretical debates going on today, ranging from the total separation of industrially manufactured products from the realm of art, to their inclusion in the art collections of world-famous museums. Ravnikar, too, in a chapter entitled “The Presence of Psychological Elements in Design,” is increasingly inclined to search for parallels between design and art. Among other things, he writes: “Every age creates a specific category of formal relationships, which are sometimes more apparent, sometimes less. The bridge from design to art, and vice versa, has always existed, but it is much easier to recognize it in retrospect than in the midst of the present.”¹⁸ He concludes the chapter by saying, “Today, we know ... that the person of today is looking for something else besides mere utility.”¹⁹

In his treatise, Ravnikar often stresses that one of the first tasks facing the field of design is the clarification of terms. Thus, he embarks on the search for a badly needed definition of what constitutes design. While we do not find any such “final” definition in this work, certain formulations do appear, which most often are expressed as a string of examples, or in the conclusion that design is something so diffuse it cannot be described in a few sentences: “Design today is becoming a comprehensive term for the widest range of relations.”²⁰ We find a similar theory of so-called “open” concepts in Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz’s *A History of Six Ideas*. In the first chapter, Tatarkiewicz writes: “[T]here are terms in common use which defy attempts to define them with any degree of accuracy. It is in the nature of these terms that their denotation in each case tends to shift over a wide area, depending on the context in which they are used. The various objects which they are supposed to ‘denote’ do not, in fact, have any features in common. Wittgenstein, who was the first to take this observation seriously, said that the referents bear, at most, a ‘family resemblance.’ This category of concepts was referred to as ‘open.’ Before long all the basic concepts of aesthetics, such as beauty, aesthetic experience and art, were relegated to this category.”²¹ On the basis of Ravnikar’s text, we would have no difficulty, it seems, in including the concept of design in this group of open concepts, since in the very first chapter he writes: “The two examples we have chosen—which are so simultaneously opposed to

16 Ibid., 37–38.

17 Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, “Art: History of the Concept” in *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics* (Warszawa: Martinus Nijhoff PWN, 1980), 25.

18 Ravnikar, *Design*, 43.

19 Ibid., 47.

20 Ibid., 12.

21 Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics*, 33.

one another—tell us more than would any long description about the heterogeneity of the phenomena on the basis of which we are trying to orient ourselves in our search for a definition of design. So many different and mutually contradictory images have arisen in the past that our efforts to compile this definition, and any attempt at a definition, can only be provisional.”²² Even today, we can find a flood of provisional definitions as to what constitutes design in almost any popular book from the design field. In his treatise, Ravnikar refers to Gropius’s proposal from the period of the Bauhaus²³ as well as to the then-current definition compiled by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) in 1964.²⁴ Ravnikar remains critical of both approaches. As for Gropius’s theory of design, he writes, “On the basis of Gropius’s rational analyses in urbanism and interior design, one can even today build wide-ranging structures; on the basis of his ideology of craftsmanship as only correct way into design creativity, one can develop nothing but misguided pedagogical theories.”²⁵ What disturbs Ravnikar about the ICSID definition is the notion of expanded functionality, with one of the aims based on the definition of the *formal qualities of industrially produced objects*. In Ravnikar’s view, this attitude toward formal qualities can lead to the worst possible kind of execution, namely, styling. In response to the pursuit of profit, he turns eastward, to what was then the Soviet Union and to Poland. While aware of the backwardness of the situation there and of the lack of a tradition, he nevertheless believes that design will, in the course of a few years, be able to develop there along correct moral and humane principles. In his ninth chapter (where he again juxtaposes West and East), he detects a socialistic aspect in the Western politics of looking toward the individual; while in the planned socialist economy, he sees the first flashes of a market. In any case, he ultimately is skeptical of both, since each of them, in its own way, reflects the teachings of the Bauhaus. He concludes with a rhetorical question about the sense of seeking the ideal forms of objects in shapes that were interesting in 1925.

Among the main proposals and measures that would need to be implemented for the development of design in Slovenia, Ravnikar singles out the reestablishment of the design studies program. His main concern has to do with preparing for the technological future that awaits us both in the world at large and at home. His forecast for design was that it would move “between cybernetically differentiated serial production and the humanistic expression of culture” and involve “shapes that are ever closer to manifestations of biological form.”²⁶ With such speculations, he goes beyond even today’s developments. Today, cybernetics still exists more on the level of scientific research than as a life practice. And in the majority of cases, we still are waiting to see the humanistic expression of culture.

Ravnikar’s *Design* touches on most of the major points that concern the discipline of design. From the standpoint of Slovenian design, it represents the first text to tackle the issues of design theory.

22 Ravnikar, *Design*, 6.

23 Gropius’s summons at the opening of the Weimar school is well-known: “Architects, painters, sculptors, we must all return to crafts!” cited in *Bauhaus 1919–1928*, Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius, eds. (Boston: Charles T. Branford Co., 1959), 16. His thoughts are presented in greater detail in the program for the school: “But proficiency in a craft is essential to every artist. Therein lies the prime source of creative imagination. Let us then create a new guild of craftsman without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist!” Walter Gropius, “Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar” in *The Industrial Design Reader*, Carma Gorman, ed. (New York: Allworth Press and Design Management Institute, 2003).

24 The ICSID definition was formulated, at the suggestion of Thomas Maldonado, in 1964 at a seminar in Bruges, Belgium on the topic of the training and education of industrial designers. It states: “Industrial Design is a creative activity whose aim is to determine the formal qualities of objects produced by industry. These formal qualities include the external features, but are principally those structural and functional relationships which convert a system to a coherent unity both from the point of view of the producer and user. Industrial Design extends to embrace all aspects of human environment which are conditioned by industrial production.”

25 Ravnikar, *Design*, 10.

26 *Ibid.*, 51.

In fact, so far there has been no other work like it in Slovenia (and sadly, it is itself preserved only in photocopies). We may attribute the absence of such a literature in the Slovene language before 1990 to the small size of the market, since books for the most part were written in, or translated into, Serbo-Croatian.²⁷ Nevertheless, the Department of Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana has been in existence now for twenty years, so a scholarly work that would define the discipline is desperately needed. Ravnikar's call for a further discussion of design thus continues to be quite relevant today.

The Rise and Fall of Journalism

According to the "Chronoscope of Design," published in the second issue of the magazine *Formart*,²⁸ after the pioneering achievements of the 1950s, the 1960s may be designated as a period of institutionalization in the design field. The most visible successes were reflected primarily in industry—at least in that part of industry that was able to see the advantages of hiring a trained designer/architect. Despite important achievements in the 1970s, we find in a text by Stane Bernik²⁹ in the magazine *Sinteza* a warning about the need to address "the strategic question of introducing design into our social space."³⁰ On the basis of the critical standards set out by ICSID in its definition of industrial design, what we see before us is, in Bernik's words, "an uninspiring picture of Slovene design"³¹ (with the exception of graphic design). The selection of industrial design products, indeed, narrows drastically when we consider the last sentence in the current definition of the time: "Industrial Design extends to embrace all aspects of human environment which are conditioned by industrial production." The most recent ICSID definition changes the old formulation as follows: "Design concerns products, services, and systems conceived with tools, organizations, and logic introduced by industrialization—not just when produced by serial processes."³² From the standpoint of the then-current understanding, such an approach would cause us to lose sight of the original mission of design, namely, the acceptance of industrial design as a cultural asset for the masses. The idea that Ravnikar put forward and Bernik developed was: "Design is, indeed, that 'democratic' creative activity which provides the masses with immediate contact with cultural (artistic) assets which are realized in the most varied ways precisely because they are useful and which thus efficiently connect with other forms of cultural and artistic creation. Because of all this, efforts to introduce design in society also represent efforts to establish a higher, more developed culture of production—especially since the contemporary design process demands total involvement, from planning to realization!"³³ Otherwise, we return to small-scale productions that resort either to elitism or to craftsman guilds, in a retreat to the applied arts. The problem of the relationship between artisan and industrial approaches also was the subject of a seminar

27 Serbo-Croatian was the language of the majority in the former Yugoslavia.

28 *Formart* was the first magazine that devoted itself exclusively to topics in graphic and industrial design. Vesna Terzan was the editor-in-chief. Published from 1991 to 1994, it was financed by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia.

29 The art historian Stane Bernik was, for many years, the editor of *Sinteza*. In his writings, he addresses contemporary Slovene architecture, urbanism, design, and photography. He lectures on the development and theory of design at the Department of Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana.

30 Stane Bernik, "Poskus opredelitive vloge inovacij": 131–132.

31 *Ibid.*, 131–132.

32 "Definition of Design" (August 2004), published on the ICSID Website: <http://www.icsid.org>.

33 Stane Bernik, "Poskus opredelitive vloge inovacij": 131–132.

-
- 34 Goroslav Keller, a Croatian theoretician in the field of design, is the author of *Dizajn/design*, published in 1975 by the marketing agency Vjesnik.
- 35 Goroslav Keller, "Oblikovanje za izvoz" ["Design for Export"], *Sinteza* 36–37 (1976): 132–134.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 132–134.
- 37 Warnings about the excessive purchase of foreign patent licenses in Yugoslav industry occur frequently in texts about industrial design. Discussing the Sixth Biennial of Industrial Design, Goroslav Keller highlights the phenomenon of the "exportation" of designers and poses the questions: "What possibility is there for our economy to extract itself from the web of [patent] licenses, and is it really strong enough to so blithely discard its creative forces?" ("Ljubljanski bienale industrijskega oblikovanja in njegov pomen" [The Ljubljana Biennial of Industrial Design and What it Means], *Sinteza* 36–47 (1976), 37). Peter Vogric had similar thoughts in regard to the Sixth Biennial of Industrial Design when he observed: "The biggest obstacle for our own development and design is the purchase of licenses. This is also the main reason why there are no greater results in our domestic design. Foreign [patent] licenses are, most of the time, already out of date; by the same token, the design achievements that come with them are also out of date" ("Industrijsko oblikovanje kot del delovnega procesa proizvodnje" [Industrial design as part of the work process in manufacturing], adapted by Matija Murko, *Sinteza* 36–37 (1976), 129). The failure to deal with this issue eventually led to an alarming situation, which Janez Jerovsek presented as follows in 1984: "According to some data, we make only 20% of our products on the basis of our own knowledge; certain other data, however, show that our share comes to only between 5% and 7%" ("Inovacije, industrijsko oblikovanje in kvaliteta kot sredstvo preživetja" [Innovations, industrial design and quality as a means of survival], *Sinteza* 65–68 (1984), 192).

entitled "Design in the Promotion of Exports," which was held in Geneva in 1975. Goroslav Keller³⁴ summarizes the two discussion issues as follows: "Are artisan work, cottage industry and applied folk art those areas of market supply where the so-called developing countries can successfully participate? Or does such a concept of economic development mean, ultimately, stagnation or even regression?"³⁵ Such thinking clearly indicates the beginnings of postmodernism, which gradually spread through society. At the end of his article, Keller labels Yugoslav design as elitist, and issues a call for "a strategic focus on a higher level of standard production quality."³⁶ At the time, however, despite many such appeals, the Yugoslav economy took a turn in a third direction, toward the purchase of foreign patent licenses.³⁷ With the collapse of the country in the early 1990s, the punishment for this lack of competitiveness was reflected most strongly in the economic sector, and resulted in the failure of numerous industrial enterprises. After fourteen years of independence, the situation in Slovenia is changing thanks to a number of small but high-quality efforts in the field of design. Unfortunately, the majority of these efforts still exist only at the prototype stage or as small-scale serial production and, in this regard, the new ICSID definition is more than welcome for an understanding of the concept of (industrial) design.

A further understanding of the concept of design was presented in the 1970s in Victor Papanek's work, *Design for the Real World*. Based on the lectures Papanek gave during his visit to Yugoslavia, Goroslav Keller presented the public with a revised definition of design: "In my book, I wrote that design is the conscious effort to achieve meaningful order. I would like to change that now and say that design is a conscious and intuitive effort to achieve meaningful order."³⁸ The first tangible results of Papanek's theory were apparent at the Seventh Biennial of Industrial Design (BIO 7). Peter Krecic, however, was critical of the increase in the number of products originating abroad on the basis of Papanek's popularity. In his view, many designers designed products for the Third World solely to alleviate their conscience. He labeled this approach as superficial, inasmuch as designers had, in Krecic's opinion, reinterpreted the various levels of Papanek's theory "as if 'design for the real world' was just a minor technical invention, embodied in the use of available (waste) resources."³⁹ After this, we see fundamental changes taking place in the approach to industrial design. Previously, the modernist understanding of industrial design had prevailed in Slovenia. Design always had been, above all else, a response to human needs and, consequently, approached the issue of function through Sullivan's dictum: "Form follows function." At BIO 7, changes in the thinking about and understanding of design received full expression. Krecic writes: "Through its exhibition of "designed" products, which attempt to solve all sorts of everyday problems, BIO has made a determined case for design as an artistic, aesthetic

category in the real world of ethical needs and ethical responses to these needs. In the view of the organizers, the conceptualization of industrial design begins not with artistically quite awkward, even primitive products (inventions) for (poor) Indians, indigenous blacks, and the inhabitants of the outskirts of South American cities; but rather with thinking on new, nonfunctional levels, which are closer to artistic ones—but with the brain of an industrial designer, as was done by Ettore Sottsass. His exhibit... was not a random addition to the biennial's program, but instead was a well-considered, meaningful supplement to it; a rather theoretical superstructure."⁴⁰ In a single move, the concept of design was reduced to the level of a superficial aesthetic category, the visual appearance of the product—the new stylism, which the postmodernism of the 1980s had introduced through the work of the Italian Memphis group and the movement's father, Ettore Sottsass. From a historical perspective, the Memphis group represents a turning point in design and, within the context in which it originated, it continues to be one of the milestones of its era. Unfortunately, however, this movement, whose very creators began to doubt its continued survival as early as the mid-1980s, spawned a sea of imitators who brought nothing to the field of design but a superficial approach. In the early 1990s, in an interview with the magazine *Ars Vivendi*,⁴¹ the Italian designer Richard Sapper, when asked for his thoughts about postmodernism, responded:

I believe that postmodernism, when viewed as a whole, has done great harm. At the beginning it was fun, but before long that which people expected from postmodernist design methods turned out to be extremely superficial. All that is left of it are formal details, and almost nothing else.⁴²

Ten years before Sapper expressed his views on postmodernism, Matija Murko, in *Sinteza*, on the occasion of the Ninth Biennial of Industrial Design, labeled the principle of privileging function over form as a purist practice in industrial design that impaired stylistic development. According to Murko, the revised approach allowed for "a rather wide range in the stylistic identity of an individual manufacturing organization as well as recognition for a different design approach within the broader regional or national scope. ... Contemporary design, then, has finally begun to approach the consumer not only in terms of functionality, but also in an emotionally less alienated regard."⁴³ Another show opened at the same time as the Ninth Biennial—an exhibition of the work of Dieter Rams, one of the major representatives of modernism in design. About this exhibition Murko writes, in the same text: "Products that originated nearly a quarter-century ago, for instance, the SK4 radio-gramophone, are still today remarkable for the freshness of their design, which proves that design, just like other forms of art, can also stand the test of time."⁴⁴ This "freshness of design" is far from the emphati-

38 Goroslav Keller, "Oblikovanje v spreminjajočem se svetu. Ob obisku Victorja Papaneka v Jugoslaviji" ["Design in a Changing World: On the Occasion of Victor Papanek's Visit to Yugoslavia"], *Sinteza* 30–32 (1974): 132–136.

39 Peter Krecic, "Sedmi bio — novi koncepti, stara in nova vprasanja" ["The 7th BIO—New Concepts, Old and New Questions"], *Sinteza* 43–44 (1978): 34–39.

40 Ibid., 34–39.

41 The magazine *Ars Vivendi* (1987–1997) regularly published interviews with designers, and monitored achievements in the practice of design.

42 Melita Zajc, "Richard Sapper, Clovek Tizio" ["Richard Sapper, the Tizio Man"], *Ars Vivendi* 14 (1992): 23.

43 Matija Murko, "Deveti bienale industrijskega oblikovanja" ["The 9th Biennial of Industrial Design"], *Sinteza* 55–57 (1981–1982): 39–44.

44 Ibid., 39–44.

cally artistic style of the 1980s and yet, despite Murko's earlier designation of modernism as a purist practice, it was a distinctive part of the public image of the Braun company, recognizable not only in Germany but also around the world. It is, indeed, very interesting to observe how theoreticians, depending on the time in which they are writing, will take the same idea and turn it to their own advantage. They all share Max Bill's thesis that the main task of industrial design is the fulfillment of human needs. During the period of modernism, this fulfillment of needs derived primarily from function; in the 1980s, the approach is inverted. The understanding of pure forms becomes the domain of experts and the educated connoisseurs of painting and sculpture. It follows, then, that the profession increasingly subordinated itself to the taste of the masses out of a desire to reach the greatest number of consumers. To put it another way, the market economy assumed the initiative over professionalism. The Italian designer and artist Enzo Mari recognized a similar predominance in a lecture he gave at the Belgrade studio ArtAvangarde. Jesa Denegri⁴⁵ summarized Mari's discussion for *Sinteza*:

The utopia of industrial design has lost the battle. ... It lost the battle because it tried to realize utopia by means of the system of commerce. ... Just like other people, we too work on an assembly line. There is no other alternative.⁴⁶

Such statements indicate the changes that had begun to be reflected in society and, consequently, in design as well. This leads us to the question of society's influence on design. Theories about design are, for the most part, directed toward design methodology, while social influences tend to be overlooked. The importance of society's role, however, can be seen in Victor Margolin's assertion: "Since we don't agree on a single theory of society, it is equally impossible to postulate only one theory of designing."⁴⁷ The 1980s brought fundamental changes to society, a reality that also was clearly expressed in design. One of the main criticisms leveled at modernism was that it neglected traditional values—a neglect reflected in impersonal products that failed to take account of the society and culture in which they originated, and so could not really fit into that culture.

Slovenian design in the early 1980s was influenced by the creation of two important institutions. In 1981, the Design Information and Documentation Center began operations at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia, and three years later, the design profession finally saw the establishment of the long-awaited Department of Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana. After decades of functionalism, postmodernism now introduced a much-needed playfulness. Unfortunately, however, this playfulness too often turned into stylism and an art-for-art's-sake philosophy. According to Stane Bernik, this moved us further away from the desired goal of "using well-considered good form to address the urgent problems of the ever-increasing visual and

45 Jerko ("Jesa") Denegri is an art historian, critic, writer, and the author of numerous books on various trends and phenomena in contemporary art. He lives and works in Belgrade.

46 Jesa Denegri, "Dvomi sodobnega oblikovalca: med zavraccanjem in povezovanjem. Enzo Mari v beograjskem Studiu ArtAvangarde" ["The Doubts of a Contemporary Designer: Between Rejection and Connection. Enzo Mari at Belgrade's Studio ArtAvangarde"], *Sinteza* 83–86 (1990): 191–192.

47 Victor Margolin, "Introduction," 7.

physical pollution of the environment.”⁴⁸ Despite such pessimism, in 1992, thanks to the initiative of Sasa J. Mächtig, Ljubljana hosted an important international event in the field of design—the 17th ICSID Congress, which bore the meaningful title “At the Crossroads.”

In the area of journalism, *Sinteza* was the only journal, right up to the second half of the 1980s, that regularly raised questions and suggested answers in the field of design. It was joined, in the middle of the decade, by the magazines *Ars Vivendi* and *Media Marketing* (today called *Marketing Magazin*, or *MM*), and later, in the early 1990s, by *Formart*, which was the first journal to devote itself exclusively to design issues. From today’s perspective, these magazines serve as the main indicator of developments in the theory and practice of design in Slovenia. Without these publications, the only additional source would be occasional exhibition catalogues which, for the most part, only give us a picture of design practice, alluding to theory merely in a few introductory sentences. In this regard, the situation today is cause for concern. *Sinteza* ceased publication in 1994, and a year later, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry stopped funding the magazine *Formart*, while *Ars Vivendi* appeared for the last time in 1997. The only publication that has managed to survive is the monthly *MM*, which, however, is primarily an advertising medium and its design articles do not appear on any regular basis. From what was already a poor situation for design theory in Slovenia, we have now moved into a situation where there is virtually no theory appearing in the media. The main problem seems to be the apathy of the profession, which—despite the social situation in which we find ourselves and the lack of understanding on the part of the state (the two most typical explanations for the profession’s lethargy)—should summon up sufficient strength to begin publishing a magazine that would present practical and theoretical developments in the profession. Already in the early 1990s, many designers, in interviews, drew attention to the urgent problem of the lack of criticism and theory. The designer Ranko Novak, in *Ars Vivendi*, made the statement: “A problem for our profession is also that it has no criticism; it doesn’t even have its own publication and therefore remains without any feedback. In fact, there are a few people who write about design. These are the ones who write about architecture and the visual arts, and who think that design belongs to the latter. But this is not true since, above all, design is not art.”⁴⁹ The designer Vladimir Pezdirc, in another interview, agreed with this last assertion. But unlike Novak, who advocated a professional design criticism, Pezdirc wanted to leave criticism to the public: “The criticism of design is, indeed, represented by the consumer or the marketplace; in our country, however, design takes place entirely in galleries and in the sphere of art.”⁵⁰ In the same issue of *Ars Vivendi* in which Pezdirc’s interview appeared was an interview with the architects Metod Prijatelj and Peter Vezjak. In introducing the two architects, Nada Vodusek stated an opposing view to that of the designers:

48 Stane Bernik, “BIO kot zrcalna podoba. Komentar in anketa ob jubilejni razstavi” [“BIO as Mirror Image: Commentary and Questionnaire at the Jubilee Exhibition”], *Sinteza*, 65–68 (1984): 99–101.

49 Nela Maleckar, “Ranko Novak. M2 angleske trave v Sahari” [“Ranko Novak: A Square Meter of English Grass in the Sahara”], *Ars Vivendi* 11 (1991): 60.

50 Nela Maleckar, “Vladimir Pezdirc. Tudi vetrosemenska je lahko izhodisce” [“Vladimir Pezdirc: Even Windseed Can Be a Starting Point”], *Ars Vivendi* 12 (1991): 40.

“The first [Prijatelj] is perhaps more of an architect, while the second [Vezjak] is perhaps more of a designer. Although there’s no point in making this distinction since the fields of contemporary design are, indeed, so closely connected and intertwined. And this, undoubtedly, is the doing of the media and mass culture. And technological reproducibility, which has shaken up the traditional concept of art, at least to the extent that design and other current art forms are still defined by it.”⁵¹ This and similar contradictory comments clearly indicate a dearth of design theory and a diverse understanding of the concept of design. The problem can be seen even in attempts to name the discipline. These attempts began as early as the 1950s, with France Ivansek, but the problem remains unresolved even today, due to a reluctance to deal with the terminological issues. Currently in Slovenia, alongside the Slovene term *oblikovanje*, people also regularly use the English borrowing *design*. To make the situation even more confusing, many people ascribe a fuller meaning to the foreign word, thus resulting in greater misunderstanding. Nearly everyone thinks of himself or herself as a professional with enough training to establish a theory and operate in the practice of design. According to François Burkhardt, who spoke in an interview with Brina Svirgelj-Mérat, a similar problem could be seen in the world at large in the early 1990s:

I’d like to mention primarily that until the sixties, theory existed parallel to design, as did the method of applications, criticism and history, which worked alongside each other and collaborated among themselves, while today we are witnessing the phenomenon that people simply do what comes to mind and go on in all possible directions, but they don’t know why. ... This matter becomes significant here because we mustn’t forget that design is, nevertheless, not the same as art or visual art. In design there are limitations which one should recognize and which have nothing to do with morals, truths, or nontruths as modernity comprehends them, but it’s a question of how to better understand differences where things stop and where they begin.⁵²

Design as a Responsibility

In the last issue of *Sinteza*, which came out in 1994, Lenka Bajzelj commented on the design congress that took place the previous year in Glasgow. In the conclusion of her article, she drew a clear picture of the end of postmodernism, as it was understood in the 1980s: “Thus, after a long period of mannerism, which encompassed fashion, design, architecture, and the visual and verbal arts, in which more or less everything was allowed, the Glasgow congress outlined a path of sobriety an effort to achieve a general economic, cultural and ecological balance, to achieve a clear distribution of tasks and responsibilities—in a word, design not only as a response but as a responsibility, and not in the sense of some dispersed social respon-

51 Nada Vodusek, “Metod Prijatelj, Peter Vezjak. Filmska perspektiva interiera” [“Metod Prijatelj, Peter Vezjak: The Cinematic Perspective of Interior Design”], *Ars Vivendi* 12 (1991): 65.

52 Brina Svirgelj-Mérat, “François Burkhardt. Evropa, postmodernizem in Eifflo stolp” [“François Burkhardt: Europe, Postmodernism, and the Eiffel Tower”], *Ars Vivendi* 14 (1992): 38.

sibility, but rather as the responsibility of governments, of the appropriate institutions, and also of each and every designer.”⁵³ The end of “metaphor” had, already in the mid-1980s, been announced by the father of the Memphis group, Ettore Sottsass. His statement that he “does not design for eternity and that Memphis will be forgotten in five years” was summarized in *Ars Vivendi* by Brane Kovic, who added, “This may indeed be an extreme position, but changes have truly arrived, and arrived first among the very members of the group. Andrea Branzi has proclaimed that a certain period is obviously over, that he is done with radicalism, that metaphors are all used up, and that the time has come for a new modernism, a new and more stable scenario of taste.”⁵⁴

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, old traumas have been revived in Slovenia in the area of understanding design. In magazine interviews, one still encounters such questions as, “What, in your view, is the task of industrial design?”—to which the younger generation of designers, quite understandably, respond with more than a hint of impatience. In an interview with the magazine *Hise*, the designer Bojan Klancar provided a didactic answer to the above question, but at the start of his answer he first made the interviewer aware of the ignorance that continues to exist in regard to the profession of industrial design: “This is a rather standard question, which the media always ask. But there is, obviously, still a need to answer it. Nobody ever asks, after all, what is the task of the fashion designer, the architect, the lawyer, and so on. But industrial design is still rather hazy, unclear; companies don’t understand the role of design, and so on ... Nevertheless, I have to answer your question by saying that the task of industrial design is a noble one; it attempts, through the nature of the product, to simplify a person’s everyday life—whether at home, creating, having fun, or studying. Industrial design is well-considered, precise, creative, and intentional action that, in the hands of a successful company, can become a strategic tool for transforming ideas into reality, stimulating innovation, and making goods more distinctive.”⁵⁵ The noble intentions and tasks of industrial design, like those of design as a whole, provide a foundation for every professional designer. Unfortunately, in some cases, designers miss their goal right from the outset. This is a problem also noted by the designer and theoretician Petra Cerne Oven: “Designers used to be revolutionaries who sought to change the world. But today, many of them merely strive to create imaginary worlds instead of helping to improve the one that exists. Designers have not stopped dealing with problems, but they have stopped trying to solve them. Instead of solving them, they wrap them in trendy flourishes, all depending of course on what they have on their shelves among their design books.”⁵⁶

The transformations and issues in regard to design thus are being passed on to the younger generation. The visible results are seen, above all, in practice, through the participation and shifts in

53 Lenka Bajzelj, “Oblikovalski kongres v Glasgowu” [“The Design Congress in Glasgow”], *Sinteza* 95–100 (1994): 232.

54 Brane Kovic, “Design ob koncu osemdesetih: iztrošenost metafor?” [“Design at the End of the Eighties: The Exhaustion of Metaphors?”], *Ars Vivendi* 5 (1988): 78.

55 Ivan Ferjancic, “Bojan Klancar,” *Hise* [Houses] 18 (2003): 120.

56 Petra Cerne Oven, “Orientacija oblikovanja in oblikovanje njegove orientacije” [“The Orientation of Design and the Design of Its Orientation”], *MM* 271 (2003): 42.

attitudes toward design on the part of the proverbially uninterested industrial companies. Changes also are evident in the area of theory. In any case, it is important to acknowledge the groundwork in design theory that has been laid in Slovenia since 1951. The first points on the map have been charted, but for a discipline as young as design theory is in Slovenia, it is unquestionably essential that the process continue.