

The Idea of Socialist Design: Iskra Show Review

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"Iskra: Non-Aligned Design 1946–1990,"
exhibition in the Architecture Museum
of Ljubljana, Slovenia,
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When I was growing up in socialist Yugoslavia, Iskra's telephones and radios were a part of everyday life. Today these are the elements of the historical horizon of the socialist culture, which is in detail presented and reconsidered by the exhibition, "Iskra: Non-Aligned Design 1946–1990," set up from November 12, 2009, to February 28, 2010 in the Architecture Museum of Ljubljana, in Slovenia. The Exhibition is accompanied by the separate editions of catalogs in Slovenian (title: Neuvrščeno oblikovanje) and English (title: Non-Aligned Design). Iskra was one of the leading companies in Yugoslavia, a maker of technological equipment and electronic consumer goods, and in the ideological jargon of that period, it was known also as "the factory" to emphasize the primary task of the period's modernization. As were all the other major production companies, Iskra was founded in the period of the planned economy, when the government itself was the main corporation, and particularly developed after new elements of the market economy had been introduced in accordance with the economic reform of 1964. Until the late 1980s, Iskra was often set as an example of a company that in the context of the socialist ideology could implement all the elements taken from liberal capitalism. In this way, the management methods, industrial design as a part of the development strategy, perception of corporate identity, and the advertising strategy became part of a distinguished national and international presence.

The exhibition of Iskra products in Ljubljana, organized by the Architectural Museum of Slovenia and Association Pekinpah,



whose curators are Barbara Predan and Cvetka Požar, starts with the thesis that Iskra's creation of a competitive product resulted from the favorable business climate in Slovenia, where the public promotion of industrial design, along with systematic advertising, became the standard of everyday life at an early point. The exhibition design follows that idea with a retrospective display of products, including photographic documentation and reproductions of advertising campaigns and original posters. Of good use for any interested visitor is a chronological comparative timeline, explaining the Iskra case within its social and political context. Not just for the nostalgic visitor, the exhibition also gives scholars the inspiration and content for further research of the material culture of the contemporary past. The informal approach to exhibition design stresses this aspect, moreover. The curators have had a hard time finding objects to exhibit, because in Slovenia, no institution collects industrial products comprehensively; therefore, even citizens were called to contribute from their homes and cellars.

Iskra was one of the most innovative technology companies, which at the same time invested in research and development, design, and advertising. The company made sophisticated hardware, such as automated traffic control devices, and was complemented by production of mass scale objects, such as telephones, television sets, and radios.

Jonathan M. Woodham, one of the writers for the exhibit's perfectly illustrated accompanying catalog, describes the social and cultural environment of Iskra's founding. The emphasis is on the favorable development that the ruling political party had in Slovenia, and these ideas were, to the utmost, focused on industry. Moreover, it is important to mention that rather early, even before the 1950s, industrial design in Slovenia was recognized as an important part of culture. The exhibition catalog follows the concept and display very well, offering theoretical and historical backgrounds, along with the documentary material. It is in full color, and this fact matters because, in spite of a stereotypical view of the black and white socialist years, Iskra was producing objects in vivid colors with a sensitive and intelligent approach to the user. The catalog is published in Slovenian and English as separate editions.

The awareness of the total design, which was in accordance with Ernesto Nathan Rogers's notion, "from the spoon to the city," has marked the Slovenian architecture of the age as well. It was in this context that the first generation of Slovenian industrial designers was trained, and the first attempts were made to create an educational frame of design at the Faculty of Architecture of The University of Ljubljana. The founding of the Biennial of Industrial Design (BIO) in Ljubljana in the mid-1960s was very important in that BIO created favorable conditions for understanding industrial design both in Slovenia and Yugoslavia. Moreover, BIO initiated the formation of the Information and Documentation Center in the

Chamber of Economy, which was supposed to be the primary place for the promotion and sale of industrial products in the national and international market. Most of these efforts were accomplished as part of the “good design” renewal ideas after the Second World War. These ideas were the basis of most of the national strategies for reaching toward and producing quality industrial products, from Great Britain to Japan. In the local context of the socialist Yugoslavia, and especially in Slovenia, this idea was evaluated in the domain of culture. Art historians, architects, and artists were the leading promoters of the idea of high-quality design, arguing that the quality of the industrial product finally contributes to the quality implementation of ideological programs. In the other Yugoslav republic’s party, leaders couldn’t understand this idea, but in Slovenia, design as a strategy was easily implemented in production and also in society.

Iskra serves as an excellent example of the success of this strategy because, from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s, it managed to produce quality mass market technology products (from telephones to televisions) that won prestigious international design awards. The exhibition emphasizes “non-alignment” as a context for understanding the company’s position and its success, and in this case the term points toward the identification of the company’s special position, which is somewhere between Western design methodology and Eastern ideological tasks. The fact is that Iskra’s history began in the 1940s with tasks that were intended to fulfill the governing party’s aim: the first task was producing a 35mm cinema projector, which in those days was an important medium of ideological communication. Iskra succeeded in this task, as it did with many other projects that were initially social tasks: telecommunications hardware, telephone sets, radios, later on the television sets, industrial process management and control equipment, and even computers. All of these products are shown throughout the exhibition.

Production tasks belonged to a context that excluded private ownership, and the bureaucracy created a hybrid transition-model of state ownership as an answer to the hard-line concept of state ownership in the Soviet Union.

During these years, the pursuit for research, technological development, and design perfection at Iskra resulted in exceptional functionality, price, and design. It should be recognized that Iskra wasn’t an individual case of a company that surpassed and, at the same time, improved the capacities of the social and ideological environment in the former Yugoslavia. Other examples arose in various industrial sectors. What is especially interesting is that the promotion of investing in industrial design was more present in the culture than it was in the economic sphere. In 1968 in Zagreb a symposium called “Industrial design and the economic and social movements in Yugoslavia” took place. The symposium indicated a high-level understanding of design in industrial modernization.

But by the time of the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, most of the industrial companies either had failed to make it through the transition toward neoliberal capitalism, or their restructuring was a disaster, as it was at Iskra. Were the industrial companies in socialism really based on an unrealistic economic model? What is the current value of such industrial design, which was undoubtedly systematically developed? Is the purpose of those objects valuable for art historians to interpret in a given period? Many questions regarding design history in socialism need to be asked and answered; the exhibition on Iskra's design provides sufficient factual material for such analysis. Researchers should take note and begin developing these additional questions and answers.