Lessons to Learn?
Past Design Experiences and Contemporary Design Practices

Proceedings of the ICDHS 12th International Conference
on Design History and Design Studies

Edited by: Fedja Vukić, Iva Kostešić
Zagreb 2020

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How Socialist Self-Management Contributed to the Understanding of Participation in Design

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Participation, self-management, Saša J. Mächtig, ICSID

This paper aims to illuminate how Yugoslav designers in the 1970s, on the basis of the Yugoslav model of socialist self-management, took a critical view of international design organisations and through that eventually secured their active participation in an international organisation — The International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID). The text will also attempt to show that, building on the workers' struggles, the role of design participation in the field of design did not come solely from the Scandinavian designers, but that an important contribution was provided by Yugoslav designers who were building on the model of self-management.*

* *This paper is a result of the research project J7-2606 'Models and Practices of Global Cultural Exchange and Non-aligned Movement: Research in the Spatio-Temporal Cultural Dynamics', which is funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.*

The Re-Actualisation of the Importance of the Equality of Voices, Cooperation and Community in Participatory Design

The many financial crises of neoliberal capitalism have been spurring more and more individuals and movements to focus on searching for concepts through which to resist the predatory logic of global business (Laville, 2010; Gibson-Graham et. al, 2013; Gregorčič, 2018; Samary, 2017). Sociologists and economists alike have been seeking autonomous and alternative economic practices, particularly in the field of social and solidarity economics (Miller, 2013; Nardi, 2016; Raworth, 2018), but also in the field of design, where, for more than a decade, we have (again) been observing an increased number of initiatives pushing community-focused sustainable design, social design, participatory design and collaborative design (Antonelli & Tannir, 2019; Manzini, 2015; Predan & Požar, 2009).

The roots of the aforementioned initiatives can be traced to the economic practices of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in the field of co-operatives and other practices involving co-management and self-determination. Specifically in the field of design, the many theoretical texts exploring the field of co-creation and co-design date the beginning of these endeavours to the 1970s. They trace the origin of participatory design to the Scandinavian worker struggles (Bødker, 1996; Greenbaum & Loi, 2012), as well as to a conference titled *Design Participation*, which was organised by the Design Research Society in Manchester, England, in 1971, and which remains an exceedingly important reference point even today (Cross, 1972; Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

The origin of user-centred design is considered by the authors of these texts to be the political activism of the civil rights movements (Luck, 2018; Sanoff, 2003); they call it a 'US-driven phenomenon' (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). They assert that 'increasingly, since the 1970s, people have been given more influence and room for initiative in roles where they provide expertise and participate in informing, ideating, and conceptualising activities in the early design phases' (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, p. 5).

The aim of this text is to show that Yugoslav designers in the 1970s — in particular the Slovenian[1] industrial designer Saša. J. Mächtig — building on the Yugoslav model of workers' self-management, introduced the idea of decentralisation into the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID), highlighting the importance of participation by voices from the so-called *periphery* of design (which, even today, are all too often neglected). Before addressing this link — and what we can learn from it — let us briefly answer the question of what Yugoslav socialist self-management was actually supposed to be.

The Self-Creation of Self-Management

The key to understanding the Yugoslav path to socialism through active integration of society is the search for an alternative to the prevailing ideology of the time; it involved the division of the world into blocs, which perpetuated a state called the Cold War. Yugoslavians chose to reject the major blocs' ideologies — both the ideology of Western capitalism and the state socialism of the East. In the former, the problem they identified was that in capitalism, the integration of society is mostly carried out by the market, with partial assistance from the state, whereas in the centrally planned socialist societies, this integration is predominantly a responsibility of the state, with partial assistance from the market (Kavčič, 1987, p. 325). As a result, in the 50s and 60s, Yugoslavia — after the infamous Stalin – Tito split that led to the so-called Informbiro Period[2] — chose to devise a third way. Whereas in terms of international relations, the path beyond bloc politics was represented by the non-aligned movement[3], the alternative in the area of the sociology of work was built on the idea of socialist self-management. According to Gal Kirn, the latter represented 'the first major break in the international workers' movement that undermined the status of infallibility of the first socialist country — the Soviet Union', while also clearly demonstrating the Yugoslavians' determination to ensure that, through socialist reforms, the *new country* of Yugoslavia would rely strictly on itself (Kirn, 2014, pp. 154 – 156), on its own citizens — workers — whom the new social regime was to provide with an equal voice and an opportunity for active self-management.

1 *In the period of 1944 – 1991, the Socialist Republic of Slovenia was one of the six constitutive republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, encompassing the territory of the current Republic of Slovenia.*

2 *There were several reasons for the Informbiro split between Stalin (the leader of the Soviet Union at the time) and Tito (the President of Yugoslavia) in 1948. Among other things, Tito was alleged to have been introducing too much self-determination in Yugoslav politics. After being expelled from Informbiro, Yugoslavia found itself in a difficult position; wedged between two powerful blocs, it had to keep finding ways of maintaining sovereignty and independence in its development.*

3 *The Non-Aligned Movement got its name during the Cold War, when its member states refused to declare allegiance to either the bloc under the influence of the US or the Soviet-led bloc. Yugoslavia played an important role in the development of the movement.*

The authors of Yugoslav socialism, which was based on worker self-management, justified their decision to pursue a third way, roughly speaking, on two of Marx's theses: on his notion of alienated labour and on his understanding of a human person as a free, creative and self-creative being. One of the theses Marx advocated was that human beings are the only creatures that produce consciously and with intent, as 'at the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement' (Marx, 1867). Accordingly, work — or labour — is identified as the precondition of human existence, but only if the person is allowed to realise their potential, to establish themselves as a self-creator (Radenović, 1982). If the person is prevented from realising their own potential, or if the nature of the prevailing social relations is such that the fruits of the person's labour are taken away — alienated — from them, then we are talking about Marx's thesis of alienation; we are talking about a worker who is in someone else's employ and therefore belongs not to himself but to the employer.

The ideologues of self-management take the view that if we attempt to combine both of these theses, there is nothing left for us to do but start working to dismantle class society, the class-based division of labour and private ownership of the means of production. On this basis, labour is finally granted its rightful place as the base of the entire social organisation (Radenović, 1982). With this new type of production and social relations, the Yugoslavian road towards worker self-management represents an attempt at realising the idea that the worker should be the one dictating the sharing of profits, the working conditions, the methods of production and the wages, as well as layoffs. This system differed from capitalism in a key way, namely that the purpose of production was not to produce surplus value (leading to production for its own sake) but to satisfy the needs of the workers, community and society in general. This was meant to liberate labour, leading to a gradual scaling back of the function of the state with the goal of its eventual abolition.

What, Then, Was Yugoslav Self-Management?

Or rather, what did it strive to be? Self-management was supposed to be 'an essential form of the liberation of labour, and thus the liberation of man as a worker and a member of the community' (Radenović, 1982, p. 182). Kirn adds that the workers' socialist self-management was not defined 'solely as public management of public affairs, but that it had to contain (self-)governance and (self-)organisation. Self-governance goes further than producers' organising (the proletariat in the classical sense), striving to think politics in every sphere of public life' (Kirn, 2014, p. 155). In practice, this was a Yugoslav experiment, one that sought to

make just distribution and the idea of direct worker participation in the management of public wealth the basis of development.

Despite initially rejecting the market, in the course of its development and in seeking the best ways of operation, the Yugoslav model of self-management increasingly began to flirt with a socialist market economy (1965 – 1967). In combination with the ideology of self-management, this led the state to increasingly decentralise political power, as well as introduce various exchanges and diverse forms of participation in the global market. Despite the bold and — in a way — remarkably utopian concept, the Yugoslav experiment also developed a number of weaknesses (for example, political antagonisms between the proletariat and the party, the proliferation of institutions and complex bureaucratic procedures, problems with the realisation of agreed upon objectives, etc.)[4]. Notwithstanding certain weaknesses and criticisms, it is important to point out that 'the Yugoslav experiment does not only represent a locally bounded peculiarity, but must be understood as a universal policy with long-term, deeper effects that did not remain confined to a strictly Balkan context' (Kirn, 2014, p. 161).

The socialist self-management model never really reached its definitive form in Yugoslavia, but the effects of its existence have reached into all pores of social action. This included the field of international design. It was by taking a critical view of the international organisations in the field of design and by calling for the introduction of elements of self-management, participation and decentralisation that Yugoslav designers eventually managed to secure their active participation in the ICSID international organisation. In other words, the active entry of Slovenian and Yugoslav designers into the world of international design organisations in the second half of the 20th century was paved with the very idea that underpinned the Yugoslav social order at the time: socialist self-management.

The Entry of Slovenian Designers Into the Field of International Design[5]

In Yugoslavia at the time there was the Secretariat for Industrial Design of the Federation of Associations of Applied Arts Artists and Designers of Yugoslavia (SID SPID YU). SPID YU was considered a typical example of a polycentric and self-managing organisation. The federation united design associations from Yugoslav republics that were established between 1951 and 1953. If the fifties were a pioneering time in Yugoslav design, the sixties can be seen as a time of institutionalisation. SID joined the ICSID in 1961[6]. Three years later, Ljubljana hosted the first International Biennial of Industrial Design (BIO), while in 1966, the rise of graphic design in Slovenia received affirmation when

4 *In the course of four decades, centralised governance was replaced by a complex network of self-managing organisations, often rife with bureaucratic procedures and contradictions and requiring arduous coordination in order to achieve common interests. Some modern authors also recognise in the Yugoslav experiment an absence of political democracy, since the ruling party class, despite recognising many labour rights, still appropriated the idea of self-management all too often (Music, 2011; Đilas, 2014; Kirn, 2014; Samary, 2017).*

5 *The study is based, in part, on researching the industrial designer Saša J. Mächtig's work done on a book and exhibition entitled* Systems, Structures, Strategies *(Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana 2015).*

6 *Documents refer to different years, most often with reference to the 2nd ICSID congress in Venice in 1961.*

the ICOGRADA Congress was held in Bled, Slovenia, only three years after the organisation's founding in London. During their studies of design and architecture, those who would eventually become the most active members of the Designers Society of Slovenia (industrial designer Saša J. Mächtig in particular), were already regularly attending international design conferences, initially as members of the audience, then later as active participants as delegates of the Yugoslav designers' association SPID YU.

In the context of this treatise, the mid-seventies stand out in particular. This was when Saša J. Mächtig wrote a text titled *Metamorphoses 2*. In it, we can detect the strong influence of Fuller's understanding of environmental issues (we have but one world with rapidly disappearing resources and a pending pollution nightmare), Papanek's theory (designing should provide for people and their genuine needs), Italian counter-design movements (opposition to the consumer society and the capital that excessively dictates design solutions, turning designers into servants), as well as Gropius's suggestion of the urgent need for the establishment of cooperation and (citizen) participation:

'The recognition of the need for interdisciplinary approach, cooperation of decision-makers and participation of users should shift the focus of our endeavours. Within this framework designers in today's changing world can play a much more important and socially responsible role than this was possible in their quality of 'form-givers' when they were dependant on a territorially restricted market in industrialized countries and on rich clients.' (Mächtig, 1974)

The paper was first presented at the conference of the English organisation DIA in Dubrovnik, Croatia, in the autumn of 1974. The paper was also accepted to the 9th ICSID congress in Moscow (1975). However, Mächtig was not allowed to read it in the 'Design and State Policy' section — unofficially because it was considered too political[7] and officially because there was not enough time. This provided additional impetus for Mächtig to actively participate in Yugoslav delegations at international events. Moreover, as delegates from a non-aligned country, the actors of the Yugoslav association of designers SID SPID YU continually objected to the overly centralist regime of an international organisation such as the ICSID. According to them, such a regime resulted in regional contributions from less developed countries being overlooked. As a delegate of the Yugoslav association at the general assembly of the international organisation ICSID in 1976 in Brussels, Mächtig offered two proposals: 1) The statute of the ICSID should prepare the basis that would provide a place

7 *Mächtig wrote (the notation is preserved as a typescript) that at the Moscow Congress (1975) that he was approached by V. M. Zanchenko, deputy director of* VNIITE *(an industrial design institute from the then Soviet Union) because he had mentioned Vietnam, Czechoslovakia and 'Big Brother'. Mächtig was told that the Congress was not political, whereas his paper was very political indeed. Since the Congress enjoyed political support, the organisers wanted to avoid complications. See: Kronologija dogodka [Event chronology], typescript, [1975], pp. 1 – 3.*

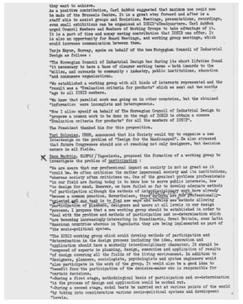

Figure 1. *Minutes IX. General Assembly, typescript, ICSID, Brussels 1976. Courtesy of the Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.*

for a representative from the so-called developing countries on the executive board. 2) A working group should be established to examine the issues related to participation and self-management *(Figure 1)*. He added:

'We are aware that our professional impact on society is not as great as it could be. [...] we have failed so far to develop adequate methods of participation, even though the methods of interdisciplinary work have already become common practice. Nevertheless, as these methods are too professionally oriented and our task is to find new ways and develop new methods that allow the participation of design-makers, designers and users at all levels in our design process, I propose that a new working group be established in order to deal with the problem and methods of participation and self-management.' (ICSID, 1976, p. 43)

He continued by stating that this principle was increasingly becoming 'a topic of interest in Scandinavia, Great Britain and some Latin American countries, whereas in Yugoslavia, this has already been implemented within the sociopolitical system' (ICSID, 1976, p. 43).

So it was already in the seventies that Mächtig, at numerous international events, called for greater participation of designers, decision makers and users on all levels. He called for the development of methods that would stimulate interdisciplinarity, participation and self-management. Words and approaches that could easily be transposed into the present, 'new' time, with no more than a few updated terms.

Even though it seems that 'new' times no longer tolerate ideas of self-management, it is nevertheless clear that the present-day quests for alternatives to the existing economic system towards co-sharing, co-working, co-creating and co-designing with all stakeholders in the process are actually revamped ideas that had either already been proposed or discussed by the profession many times before. Jacques Rancière would probably see this recurrence as the recycling of old ideas from modernity with the old structures remaining exactly how and where they had already been:

'The so-called 'grand narrative' of modernity has not been dismissed. Instead, its elements have been recycled. What happens is not a process of erosion of power, conflicts and beliefs heading towards some sort of levelling of the old oppositions in and of ideological consensus, but an active attempt at construing an order of domination, able to dismiss any resistance, or any alternative, by imposing itself as self-evident and inescapable. Our time is therefore not a 'post-time' but 'anti-time'. The evolution we have witnessed in the past three decades is, strictly speaking, intellectual counter-revolution.' (Rancière, 2013, p. 134)

8 *The group prepared the report to be discussed at the general assembly in Helsinki (1981) by April 1981. See:* Mednarodne novice. Informacije. ICSID *[International News. Information. ICSID], typescript, Ljubljana 1980;* ICSID News, July/August *1980, p. 1; Saša Mächtig, Poročilo s 1. sestanka posebne delovne skupine za* ICSID *v Vel. Britaniji [Report on the 1st meeting of the Working Group on the Future and Structure of* ICSID *in Great Britain], Ljubljana, 20 June 1980; Report on the Working Group on the Future and Structure of* ICSID, ICSID *Secretariat, Brussels, April 1981.*

9 *Peter Lord, the future secretary general and president of the international council of the* ICSID, *turned out to be the key figure who openly supported the activity of Yugoslav designers in the* ICSID *from the very beginning. The correspondence between Lord and Mächtig is preserved in the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia.*

10 *Mächtig's role in the group was to examine polycentric processes and the possibilities of regionalisation. Mächtig's years of active participation in the* ICSID *organisation later culminated in the organisation of the 17th* ICSID *World Design Congress in Ljubljana, Slovenia in 1992.*

People as Carriers of Capabilities

11 *A practical example of quality industrial and graphic design from Yugoslavia in the time of self-management was* Iskra, *Yugoslavia's largest company in the fields of electromechanics, telecommunications, electronics, and automation. In late 1962, Iskra established Yugoslavia's first industrial design department with the idea of creating a house style for the company. In the ten years that followed, Iskra was the only Yugoslav company that considered design to be a strategic activity. More information: Barbara Predan and Cvetka Požar,* Iskra: Non-Aligned Design 1946–1990, AML *and Pekinpah, Ljubljana, 2009.*

Perhaps this might shed some light on why Mächtig's *Metamorphoses 2* was labelled by the organisers of the 9th ICSID as too political, and was consequently withdrawn from the programme. The origins of 'anti-time' and the resulting cyclicity in design go much further back than just three decades. In his report from the Milan congress in 1983 Mächtig wrote:

'The discussion on the latest developments in design associated with the most developed countries became even more heated during the congress. Ever since the 1960s it has become apparent that functionalism has lost motivation in design. Of course the so-called post-industrial era does not understand the historical moment through the denunciation of industry, even though the latter can no longer be the source of cultural inspiration.' (Mächtig, 1983, p. 3)

Despite the explicitly obvious active constructing of the order of domination by the developed countries, the international community, at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, eventually acquiesced to considering the alternative that was proposed by the Yugoslav delegates. In 1980, at the 11th General Assembly in Paris they adopted — based on the amended initiative of Vesna Popavić and Saša J. Mächtig — a proposal to establish a working group on the 'future and structure of ICSID'.[8] The group was led by Peter Lord[9] and Mächtig[10] was appointed a member *(Figure 2)*. The working group was to explore the possibilities of changing the statute to create a more polycentric organisation, to transfer the decision-making power to individual regions and establish better communication, cooperation and democracy between ICSID members.

If Nigel Cross still wondered whether participation is the answer in his introduction to the conference proceedings *Design Participation* (1972), writing: 'There is certainly a need for new approaches to design if we are to arrest the escalating problems of the man-made world and citizen participation in decision making could possibly provide a necessary reorientation', Mächtig leaves any doubt behind. On the contrary: he advocates loudly for participation on the basis of its implementation in the Yugoslav sociopolitical system in the form of self-management. As an example of best practice, he aspires to introduce more pluralism through greater involvement of regional voices — with the aim of eventually eliminating the excessive centralisation inherent in the system — , and to see the principles of self-management implemented in an international organisation such as the ICSID. On the other hand, he already sees active participation by everyone as the next stage in design. All we are missing to finally achieve the latter are methods that would enable us to implement such cooperation and co-design in practice[11].

Figure 2. *A meeting of the working group for the 'future and structure of ICSID'. Left to right: Frans van der Put, Mary Mullin, Peter J. Lord, Saša J. Mächtig, Françoise Jollant, Paris 1980. Courtesy of the Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana.*

In an idiosyncratic way, Mächtig's argument (that he derives from the concept of self-management) for the necessity of everyone's participation — as each and every one of us is crucial, and, more importantly, capable of cooperation — is reminiscent of Ezio Manzini's theses. According to Manzini, people should not be seen 'only as carriers of needs but also of capabilities. Thus, they are not only part of the problems they find themselves facing but also actors in their solution' (Manzini, 2019, p. 48). In his book *Design, When Everybody Designs*, Manzini (2015) posits that the key to the process of modifying our environment are the protagonists, that is, all those who actively participate, whether knowingly or unknowingly (p. 77). For designers, it is vitally important to observe and identify the protagonists. What's more, the task of the designer is not to assume the role of the decision maker steering the process of modifying our environment, but to be able to recognise and, if necessary, empower the protagonists. In other words, 'people's well-being is based on their design capability — on their freedom to design how to live — and to live a life that they themselves have, at least in part, designed autonomously' (Manzini, 2019, p. 48). This brings us back to the topic of self-management, as these words seem to echo its ideology: 'the self-creative nature of a human individual is pretty much constantly manifested in how the individual expresses themselves, discovers and asserts their power, capability and freedom' (Radenović, 1982, p. 176). All of the above is necessary for establishing possibilities for an individual to assert himself/herself as a self-creator, since this is the only way to create the prerequisite for the comprehensive development of the individual and society. Establishing an equal voice enables one to build on belonging to a community; mere satisfaction of particular interests is thus superseded.

Conclusion

Just as we acknowledge that in Scandinavian countries, issues of participation have found their way into the field of design on the basis of labour struggles, the same can also be attributed to the Yugoslav sociopolitical experiment of worker self-management. In other words, starting from an alternative social order, one that put workers' rights at the forefront and was based on Marx's thesis of alienated work and man as a self-creative being, Yugoslav designers realised and understood early on the importance and role of participation: in the design profession and in the community, as well as more broadly in society.

This example has shown that a voice from what is considered the periphery — a voice originating in a different form of daily life, as was undoubtedly the case in Yugoslavia during the time of socialist self-management — can influence the wider international community. However, it has also demonstrated that history and design theory quickly forget those peripheral voices — voices from countries with a system that the wider international community considers unacceptable, or at best an unusual experiment. And it falls on all of us who draw on this heritage to keep reminding the world of this, albeit still from the periphery. What we want to point out is that a plurality of voices in the design community is not something to be feared; that what Western authors keep telling us in their current books — how to participate, how to encourage participation, how to give voice to carriers of capability — is something that needs to be actually heard and practiced in earnest, even in the context of writing design history and theory.

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