

VILLA SOVIETICA

SOVIET OBJECTS: IMPORT-EXPORT

Edited by Alexandra Schüssler

Photography: Willem Mes and Johnathan Watts

This book has been conceived for the exhibition *Villa Sovietica*
at the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (Switzerland)
from 2nd October 2009 to 20th June 2010

WHY THE SOCIALIST STATES FAILED IN RESPECT OF DESIGN

Harry Lehmann / Wolfgang Ullrich

Harry Lehmann: Wolfgang Ullrich, I would like your advice as a consumer theorist with regard to an essay that is causing me some difficulty. Its title is "Die ästhetische Wende. Warum die DDR an ihrem Design gescheitert ist" [The aesthetic turnaround: why the GDR failed in terms of design], and the proposition I put forward in it is strongly inspired by your book *Habenwollen. Wie funktioniert die Konsumkultur?* I argue that the turnaround in 1989 was not a political revolution, but an aesthetic rebellion.

Wolfgang Ullrich: That sounds very promising; I would agree! Where is the problem?

HL: The problem is that people accept this idea from me without any argument. They nod readily if I assert that it was GDR design that made its citizens rise against their state. When wrote it I just had a kind of philosophical comedy on the collapse of the Wall in mind.

WU: But the proposition seems entirely plausible to me, Herr Lehmann. And you are not the first person to express it. For instance in a lecture in 1993 Gernot Böhme said "that the *victory* of the capitalist system was among other things a victory of design". And he also said: "When motivation, wishes and desires are at stake, what counts first and foremost is not what capitalism does, but the glamour it spreads."¹ And in an essay in 1996 Bazon Brock asked the question, "Why did the walls collapse?" and gave the following

answer: "Wanting to understand the movement of whole bodies of people as an expression of a barrier-breaking will for freedom may be honourable, but only half accurate if we see what they had in mind and clarify the picture of freedom they seemed to be yearning for. The answer comes from the clamouring crowd: they wanted to have a share of the goodies."²

HL: Well, yes, those are the kind of sweeping platitudes that can be quickly jotted down – as if this cartload of East German monkeys still wanted just ice cream and bananas. But have you ever read a plausible rationale for it anywhere?

WU: I do not know of any subtler theories. But I am puzzled: you seem to be denying your own proposition of the æsthetic rebellion in the formerly socialist states – in the USSR and Hungary as well as the GDR.

HL: That is why I want to discuss the matter with you. I no longer know quite what to make of it. As I said, I wanted to promulgate a fine half-truth for the domestic amusement of Germany, but the longer I spend thinking about it...

WU: For me it is all quite clear: the citizens of the former socialist states wanted to participate at last in the highly developed consumerist world that appeared to satisfy so many wishes and longings, and indeed held out the increasingly enticing promise that consumer products would open up great opportunities for new experiences and achievements. Socialist production did not stir such powerful emotions. What I have never quite understood is why the authorities there did not see what seductive power the West's consumer goods exerted. Why did they not at least try to come up with something to counter the æsthetics and advertising of Western products?

HL: They did see the problem. Just to take the example of the GDR: at the VIIIth Party Day of the SED [Socialist Unity Party] in 1971 the slogan "Einheit von Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik" [Unity of economic and social policy] was coined, which was really tantamount to making the production and distribution of consumer goods into a political objective. Only it was a completely hopeless undertaking that could not be implemented under the conditions of socialism as it really existed.

WU: Because there was no market economy...

HL: Only at first glance. In fact, it was an insoluble design problem they stumbled over, and that was what made it impossible for any consumer

goods in the real – western – sense of the word to be manufactured under socialism.

WU: Yet there were consumer products, only they were in short supply and of poor quality.

HL: That is what we thought in the GDR for forty years too, but truth to tell they were pseudo consumer goods that could not be consumed properly at all.

WU: That sounds very radical, what exactly do you mean? And how can you substantiate such an argument?

HL: Using your idea that the West's production of consumer goods entered a new phase in the 1970s. In your book about "wanting to have" you showed very convincingly how market research methods were increasingly used to design products to suit the customers' individual preferences. Market research leads to individualised design, if I have understood you correctly.

WU: That is right. Since then sociological and psychological studies have been used to find out what people expect of particular products or brands. Once their wishes, emotions and associations are known, they can be offered exactly the products they "want to have". That strengthens individualism because both sociological and psychological investigations are aimed precisely at recognizing the differences between people. These diagnoses are used to design product variants so that nowadays, to overstate the case, there is a differentiated offer for introverts and extroverts, conservative Catholics and progressive atheists.

HL: You could also put it this way: there is a design to match every bad taste; the question of "good design" has become secondary.

WU: Quite. Today's producers have no educational ambitions such as those of the founders of the Werkbund, for instance. To start with they specify products not out of love of humankind, but because they want to turn as many people as possible into committed consumers, who are willing to buy. But contrary to what left-wing criticism of consumerism always maintains, the producers do not have any interest in manipulating people either. It would take far too much time, money and effort to start changing mentalities to make people buy specific products. Instead of manipulating them, they

go into their desires in as much detail as possible. That is where the potential for profit lies.

HL: Ever since reunification I have asked myself again and again, but to no avail, why I have to decide between thirty shower gels in a department store. Your book gave me the first plausible explanation for this amazing phenomenon, which you can only get used to if you have experienced it as a child: market research analyses the fictions, desires and expectations of groups of consumers so that industry can make its range of goods ever more specific. Products are designed with a view to distinct backgrounds, groups and types, and then in turn further subdivide the consumer groups. When I grasped this autopoietic consumption loop on reading your book, I had the feeling that I had been initiated into the trade secret of the western market economy.

WU: I am delighted to hear it. You have summarised my argument beautifully, and I would not have thought of being able to offer æsthetic enlightenment in that way. But what exactly has this got to do with German reunification and design in the socialist states?

HL: That is the point: nothing! In socialism they basically were not in a position to join in effecting this explosion of consumer goods through publicity, fashion, packaging and design. The whole idea of individualised consumption contradicted the socialist ideal of society! How could the æsthetic preferences of a population living under the conditions of de facto socialism possibly be investigated, and how could a new, socialist product design possibly be created? Supposing you had already written your book at that time and you had been invited to reform stagnating socialist design. How would you have gone about it?

WU: I would have studied how the ideals of socialism could be disseminated and reinforced by the design of consumer products.

HL: You would have developed political propaganda design? I can't believe it!

WU: Purely theoretically, as a theorist one has to examine such options. But as I have already said, it is probably too expensive to develop products that take no account of people's needs and longings because then they do not accept them. Even if they have no alternative and have to buy what they are offered, they remain detached from them – and the products do not arouse the emotions the manufacturers had hoped for. So a successful

consumer culture has to be in harmony with the results of market research. But the research soon shows that people are very different. That happened in socialist countries as in the West. For there were not only workers and peasants, there were also intellectuals, party officials and office workers, and beyond that, men and women, old and young, optimists and pessimists, educated and uneducated people, and so on.

HL: Exactly. In the western market economy it can be fairly reliably concluded that a group with one background will buy different watches, cars and dogs from another, and its tastes will again vary from those of a third group. But how are you supposed to work with such a model in a “classless society”, which defines itself precisely by the abolition and removal of all social distinctions? The mere hypothesis that people working on the land form an underclass, for example, or that the party nomenklatura might be a new upper class, could only be an invention by enemies of the state. But even simple societal-environmental studies, say investigating the æsthetic preferences of the workers in comparison to those of the intelligentsia, came up against structural resistance from a society that was based on a communal ideal.

WU: But it is not only sociological classifications that threatened to endanger the system. Differences established by psychology would not have been valid either, would they?

HL: Studies investigating the lifestyle, moral values and expectations of the future, existential wishes and fears of the population would have undermined the socialist state in exactly the same way. It seems obvious to me. They would have singled out individualistic tendencies which according to the collectivist self-image of society were banned or seen as a negative deviation from the norm. Anyone whose hair was too long or whose look was at odds with the socialist image of society was “asocial”.

WU: If this analysis is correct and the differentiation of design did endanger socialism as it really existed, then I wonder how they could have come up with different designs at all under such conditions. Nonetheless there was in fact a certain pluralism – several makes of car for example (if you look at the product range of all the socialist states taken together), variants on home appliances, and more than one line of standardised crockery.

HL: They had inherited a certain diversity from pre-war days, but basically they did not know how to organise the production of consumer goods. So they decided that all collective combines and large concerns –

whether they were making tractors, machine tools or ships – had to use five percent of their production capacity for the manufacture of consumer goods. So they made whatever fitted most easily into their existing production processes. This practice had been tried out in the Soviet Union too, so in the late 1980s I came across a light stainless steel saucepan that the salesgirl proudly told me was produced by the Leningrad rocket industry.

WU: Many production managers in the publicly owned concerns must have felt that the obligation to produce consumer goods was a tiresome chore. But it is clear that no coherent design culture could evolve under such conditions.

HL: In fact the diversity or rather the dispersal of design in socialism ranged from the rejection of design, kitsch and hybridisation to designs in the manner of conceptual art. Therefore I would be reluctant to speak of stylistic pluralism, such as developed in western consumer societies. The aesthetic situation in the GDR was not plural, but disparate. When it came down to it, they were guided by every conceivable private, political, artistic or trivial idea, only not – to put it in your words – by what consumers wanted to have. In this way they created consumer goods with pseudo design, i.e. products that nobody could really rightly want to have.

WU: That also explains why some products from the socialist countries were seen as particularly fascinating in the West after the lifting of the Iron Curtain. Precisely because they were made with a disregard for any need, they seemed to come from a different planet. It was only through them that it became clear how perfectly styled and coordinated the West's product world had become. Basically a new order of decorum came into being here. Just as in antique rhetoric there were precise distinctions telling people when and how they were to speak and behave, today's consumer culture decrees who uses which products on which occasion. Products from the former eastern block, on the other hand, strike us as archaic and cumbersome, but also as touchingly naive, indeed innocent. But I can see how, in reverse, western products were perceived in the East as coming from a different planet too. Suddenly there was something that appealed to deep, often barely conscious wishes and longings – and suggested they would fulfil them. And suddenly it was allowable to expect something from things, not just to be bored or even frustrated by them. People no longer only received things they did not really want.

HL: It was this enduring frustration that people in socialist countries were exposed to day in day out in a world of pseudo consumer products, and from which – short of fleeing the country – there was no escape, that led to the creeping development of a mass psychosis. The core belief was that people in the East were being cheated of their lives, while paradise with proper consumer products lay in the West. This mass psychosis erupted in 1989 and brought the wall tumbling down. In short, that is how I explained the reunification drive in my essay.

WU: The way you describe it, the socialist states ultimately became victims of a calamitous image of society. But it seems to me that a second factor has to be taken into consideration. I think they failed to see that western consumer products increasingly functioned as mass media. As products lose their use value and acquire fictional and emotional values, they develop an effect similar to that of books, films, newspapers or television and take on more importance in people's lives. Thus the West did not promote itself only via the traditional media: every western product operated as a missionary.

HL: Without the ongoing confrontation with consumer goods from the West, a mass psychosis would not have developed. Western television alone would probably not have been enough for large sections of the population to start feeling that they were living in the wrong place. The millions of parcels sent across the border for decades also played a key role; when I really think about it, the parcel from the West actually functioned as a mass medium in East Germany. The coffee, chocolate, toys or cosmetics “from over there” were unpacked on the kitchen tables of the GDR and these fairytale products spread the message of the consumer paradise that lay on the other side of the wall.

WU: It is intriguing that the authorities obviously failed to appreciate that properly. They were frightened of western television – but far less frightened of the æsthetics of western products, yet at least from the 1970s when the economy was more prosperous and people were less attached to use values, æsthetics became incredibly attractive and powerful. It seems to me that the underestimation of consumer æsthetics resulted from a long – and not only Marxist – tradition of dismissing everything to do with consumerism as banal or trivial and of no account. If they had not been so resentful and critical of consumerism, the states in the East might have been more ambitious about developing a powerful product æsthetic of their own – and perhaps they would still be there today. What do you think?

HL: Oh no; I think it was a completely nopeless case. The production of consumer goods in socialism was like the squaring of a circle. The party leadership in the early 1970s recognized that socialist production could no longer focus solely on the demands of world revolution and the international class struggle, but had to be directed at the concrete “needs of the people”. But the fact that the need for individualisation ultimately stood behind those consumer needs was more than just a gap in the Marxist-Leninist theory of the “scholarly world view of the working classes”. Such a desire can only be satisfied in practical terms if the products themselves demonstrate a strongly individualised design, so that each person can make the independent purchasing decisions that are part and parcel of an independent lifestyle. But it was precisely this fiction value that could not be visualised in socialism, as there was an anti-collectivist impulse inherent in it which was potentially divisive.

WU: Then there would still have been the option of developing a standard socialist design and implementing it politically. In relation to the GDR, I am thinking primarily of the Bauhaus tradition. But of course, at least in the early days, the aversion towards formalist approaches was opposed to it. Incidentally, it is interesting that when it was a question of art and not consumerism, the authorities did indeed endeavour to satisfy the needs of the people. They objected to abstract art for instance mainly by arguing that the people would not like it, claiming that they would want something descriptive, close to their own lives. At art exhibitions they even regularly conducted surveys to find out which exhibits appealed most. To go to extremes, you could say that art was the only field in which something approaching opinion polls was used. But that is just further proof that consumerism was not taken very seriously. Besides, the opinion surveys at exhibitions differed from western market research, for they always tried to single out just one style or a small number of subjects as being particularly popular. There was no room for pluralism there either, which again confirms your proposition.

HL: The population at large did not want a standard socialist design at all, irrespective of whether it was good or bad, formalist or descriptive. Instead they coveted differentiated capitalist design that appeals personally to the individual. Therefore the design policy of the GDR in particular wavered helplessly between Bauhaus ideals and those of popular art – and finally resigned itself to imitating western design after a fashion.³ I would even surmise that any standard design, even if it were as convincing as Bauhaus design, would be at odds with the idea of consumerism.

WU: You are probably right. Yet I am bothered by the thought that a future dictatorship might well be built and stabilised via product design. If, as people say, the basis of every dictatorship lies in gaining control of the mass media, then prospective dictators would have to be concerned more about the mass medium of consumption (and so product aesthetics) than almost anything else. It is no longer enough to control television and the press – they also have to hold sway over the emotions aroused in people looking at supermarket shelves, and what they think to themselves in drugstores or sports shops. I even venture to hypothesize that a dictatorship could no longer be set up today at all without the help of product designers.

HL: Bad luck for the dictators...

WU: I would not be so sure.

1 Gernot Böhme, "Der Glanz des Materials. Zur Kritik der ästhetischen Ökonomie" (1993), in id., *Atmosphäre*, Frankfurt/Main 1995: 49–65, here p. 52.

2 Bazon Brock: "Werbung und gesellschaftliche Kommunikation" (1996), in id., *Der Barbar als Kulturheld*, Köln: 2002: 536–545, here p. 536.

3 These three main trends in GDR design are identified by Ralf E. Ulrich, see "Einleitung" in *SED. Schönes Einheitsdesign*, Köln: Taschen Verlag 2008: 7–9.