



**Tom Cubbin.** *Soviet Critical Design: Senezh Studio and the Communist Surround.* Cultural Histories of Design Series. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019. Illustrations. 248 pp. \$130.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-02199-0.

**Yulia Karpova.** *Comradely Objects: Design and Material Culture in Soviet Russia, 1960s-80s.* Studies in Design and Material Culture Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 248 pp. \$130.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5261-3987-0.

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The history of Soviet design seems to have abruptly ended with the replacement of the avant-garde and constructivism with socialist realism in 1932. It remained almost nonexistent in serious scholarly debate until recently, with two monographs published nearly simultaneously. Tom Cubbin's and Yulia Karpova's books confirm that it is time to take a thoughtful look at how Soviet design evolved after World War II and discuss its achievements and its limitations. Both authors insist that post-Stalinist design stemmed from avant-garde experiments of the 1920s and 1930s and was influenced by contemporary Western design practices that penetrated the USSR via cultural exchange with socialist countries. The purpose of this double review is to assess what has been done and what could be potentially added to this very rich and understudied subject.

Cubbin's *Soviet Critical Design: Senezh Studio and the Communist Surround* is an attempt to outline the history of the creative design studio that was based in the village of Senezh, located about seventy kilometers from Moscow and operating from 1964 to 1992. The studio functioned as an ex-

perimental teaching and practical laboratory of design and design theory and organized seminars and schools for numerous designers, architects, and artists from the Soviet Union and socialist-bloc countries in order to facilitate critical thinking among industrial and environmental designers. Influenced by Georgii Shchedrovitskii's philosophical concepts of the "theoretical-practical approach" and "collective design thinking," the studio both worked on commissioned assignments and created "visionary" projects, which never came to realization (so-called paper design or paper architecture). Cubbin's understanding of Senezh's achievements is based on the titular concept of "the communist surround," which he explains as "an environment that supports forms of intellectual creative freedom that would be essential components in the spiritual transformation of mankind" (pp. 1-2). The idea of "critical design" is derived from Western European movements, and Cubbin highlights that "by including Senezh studio in these histories of critical design, it is possible to map the emergence of a range of practices that discursively explored ideology and alienation in the production of the material environment on

both sides of the Iron Curtain” (p. 6) The book features five chapters and two appendices with a complete list of Senezh projects and short bios of several key people involved in the studio projects. The reproduced images the author explores are, in my copy of the book, unfortunately blurry.

Chapter 1 outlines art, technical aesthetics, and design during Nikita Khrushchev’s Thaw. It describes the foundation of VNIITE (All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics or Vsesoiuznyi issledovatel’skii institut tekhnicheskoi estetiki) in 1962, which became the official declaimer of new Soviet design approaches, or the “state system of design,” and acted as the official facilitator between the government and the industrial production within the planned economy. According to VNIITE, technical aesthetics as a “structured discipline” aimed to unite engineering with art, while produced goods were supposed to reflect “the spirit of rationality and objectivity” (pp. 26-27). As objects they not only had to be comfortable, beautiful, and reliable but also had to create a feeling of pride among the people living in a socialist country. The major theorists of Senezh and the proponents of technical aesthetics closely affiliated with VNIITE (Karl Kantor and Evgenii Rozenblium) were privileged to go on cultural and professional exchange tours to Eastern European countries and brought certain Western influences to the theory and practice of the Senezh studio.

The second chapter explores the emergence of the Senezh studio and its early years. It reviews its innovative pedagogical program and analyzes its practical results based on experimentation with reviving “formalism,” which at this point was possible only within design practices and was not permitted in studio art. The chapter also tackles how the new principles of industrial design were transferred into actual production as well as the appearance of “futurological design” in Senezh. In chapter 3, Cubbin examines visual propaganda as a field of experimentation and the studio’s switch

to urban design in the 1970s. He argues that Senezh attempted to “reaccommodate the ideals of the Soviet 1960s into the realities of artistic production in the following decade.” He also asserts that “the waning belief in the idea that a reformed socialism might enable a transition to communism in the near future led designers to seek an alternative expression of the values of the Thaw” but does not explain to what extent the beliefs in the communist future were common and why this “shift” happened (p. 105). Chapter 4 is devoted to the “museification” projects, such as the 1981 exhibit *We Are Building Communism*, its Senezh contribution titled *Cosmic Cultural Centre*, and the 1977 project *Underground Cultural Centre*, which was never realized. A final chapter is dedicated to the last decade of Senezh and its turn from industrial and urban design to photography and installation.

In general, this book shares an understandable fascination with what Senezh was and how its leaders envisioned Soviet design. However, this group is mostly seen from the internal perspective of their major theorists. The monograph produces a somewhat idealistic view of Senezh’s achievements and hardly offers a critical observation of its limitations. Speaking of the translated terminology, some terms are not particularly convincing, at least from my viewpoint. The Soviet (Russian-language) terms *khudozhestvennoe proektirovanie* and *khudozhestvennoe konstruirovanie* were used as the replacement of the Western term “design”; they are interchangeable and mean “artistic design.” The term “projecteering,” however, could be specifically used only for the Senezh conceptual vision and its projects that remained on paper and never came to realization, not to the entire professional specialization.

Certainly, further contextualization would have been helpful. Even though Cubbin mentions that Senezh’s funding came from the USSR Union of Artists and that VNIITE funding relied on contracts with industry, he never explicitly clarifies

how this socialist system of official power/funding—design—production—distribution worked (or did not work) in relation to all the projects (and not just visual propaganda). Despite the difference in funding sources, all individuals involved in these institutions were government employees, whose work was controlled by official power; all their initiatives were to fulfill its vision. The book does not mention that in contrast to the market economy and production, competitive tendering or challenges for grants or fellowships were completely absent in the socialist planned economy; in addition, due to strict registration rules, migration from city to city to find better job opportunities was hardly possible. This led to difficulties in attracting new talent. The same people worked at the same institutions until their retirement without any stimulus for moving forward, which created stagnation in many spheres of socialist life. Similarly, Senezh and its achievements (including its “protests against the realities of socialist modernity,” as the author puts it [p.131]) were associated with the same people (who were paid by the state) for *decades*, a fact that provokes additional questions. How did Senezh attract new talent? If Senezh's designers opposed themselves to VNIITE and to official power structures, then how did this studio survive for decades without being shut down? How did Senezh keep its independence? On the other hand, all projects were based on teamwork (according to Georgii Shchedrovitskii's philosophy) and no individual authorship was recognized; all reproduced images state only the names of the leaders of the projects in which several people were involved. What was the role of an individual designer or a concept creator? Why was the individual contribution never rewarded and authorship acknowledged? How did this affect the collaboration between the remaining unrecognized designers and the leaders or the group? If this was an ultimate philosophical conception that laid the foundation of this group's activity, then perhaps this “futile authorship” deserves a bit more critical exploration.

While attempting to establish the theoretical grounds of design thought in the 1970s, Cubbin mentions the discipline of culturology, which, according to the author, influenced the designers of Senezh. However, culturology as a discipline was shaped only in the late 1980s and the early 1990s as a field that studied the theory and history of culture; in the 1970s it had not been conceptually formed yet. Semiotics was not a subfield of culturology as Cubbin assumes but was shaped within linguistics and literary studies with a specific focus on textual analysis and was never taught as a part of culturology (with some exceptions, such as Yuri Lotman's volume devoted to history of culture, *Besedy o russkoi kul'ture* [Conversations on Russian culture], first published in 1993). It remains unclear why these still-forming and not overlapping fields were important for the Senezh design studio and its teaching programs in the 1970s and how they were connected to the practice in the studio.

The theme of theatricalization in Senezh designs in the 1980s appears limited to Lotman's comments on the “poetics of everyday life” and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Bakhtin's text was known by Rozenblium and, as Cubbin claims, was “a favourite text of the Thaw intelligentsia,” which is questionable as this text was written for (i.e., read and known mostly by) professional philologists and historians and not for the general public (p. 129). It would, however, be worth exploring the emerging interest in Renaissance art and literature ingrained in a much broader cultural background, including the extreme popularity of theatrical genres among the intelligentsia and cultural elite. The rediscovery of European Renaissance and baroque literature in general became influential in Soviet cultural production. For example, *Till Eulenspiegel* (Charles De Coster's 1867 *La Légende et les Aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs*, first translated from French in 1915 and made into a 1976 Soviet film) and Giovanni Bocac-

cio's *Decameron* (first translated in 1896; subsequently published in a new translation in 1970) both fascinated the general public. On the other hand, the visual inspiration for Senezh "theatrical" designs could come from Russian prerevolutionary neoclassicist tendency expressed in different media, including art periodicals, such as *Apollo* (*Apollon*, 1909-17), which was likely well known among artists and designers. Similarly, the cultural context of creating the *Cosmic Cultural Centre* (1980) was wider and could be explained by the enormous popularity of sci-fi literature and film. Its visual and structural forms could be inspired by the prototypes from the pavilion *Cosmos* at the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy (*Vystavka dostizhenii narodnogo khoziaistva*) and by the many filmic interpretations of future space explorations that attracted millions of viewers. For instance, Andrey Tarkovsky's *Solaris* came out in 1972, the Soviet-Polish film *Inquest of Pilot Pirx* (*Doznanie pilota Pirksa*) in 1978, and the very popular children's film trilogy *Moscow—Cassiopeia* and *Teens in the Universe* (*Otroki vo vselennoi*) in 1973 and 1974. Including such wider contextual explorations would have made this monograph useful not only in specific seminars of industrial design or the theory of design but also in Russian and Slavic studies classes.

Karpova's *Comradely Objects: Design and Material Culture in Soviet Russia, 1960s-1980s* came out right after Cubbin's book was published. It is an ambitious study devoted to reconstructing the history of the institutionalization of design as a field of artistic production, the evolution of its theoretical grounds and changing agendas, and the institutionalization of the profession of designer and decorative artist in the post-Stalin Soviet Union. As the author claims, her main purpose is to create a connection between the 1920s Russian avant-garde "productive art" or "productivism" and the new material culture aesthetic that emerged with Khrushchev's Thaw, which signified a shift away from Stalinist views on the aesthetics of objects. Karpova claims that it was the "second his-

torical attempt to create comradely socialist objects, instituted as a response to burgeoning Western consumer culture that was being used as a tool of soft power in the cultural Cold War" (p. 4). To achieve her goal, the author extensively explores new archival sources and rarely discussed Soviet art periodicals (such as *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* [Decorative art of the USSR], 1967-93) that communicated this reformist professional vision of new aesthetics, as well as the regulations that made this shift possible.

Karpova describes this design revolution as the turn toward "functionalism" and against "petty-bourgeois tastes and excessive decoration," which happened from "above" as official powers articulated these views via such institutions as VNIITE, which outlined new design policies and their practical delivery (p. 5). She situates her approach in "the ongoing scholarly discussion concerning the position of professionals under state socialism [to] contest the dual image of them as either repressed, innocent intellectuals or as opportunistic collaborators with the regime" (p. 6). The process of initiating new policies, however, did not result in mass production, and they often remained as visionary utopian conceptualizations that could not be realized in slow-responding Soviet industries.

The first chapter is devoted to new design concepts that emerged after Joseph Stalin's death to improve "bad taste" and overcome backwardness by creating contemporary functional objects and thereby realize socialist modernity. Karpova explores the Pioneer Palace in Moscow (built in 1961) as the foremost example of these quintessential conceptual changes. The second chapter is focused on the further conceptualization of new socialist living through contemporary furniture, household goods, and home appliances that meant to eliminate "the chaos of forms" and replace malfunctioning and outdated furnishings and items for everyday use (pp. 74, 87-88). The author highlights that to overcome the "disorder of things,"

Soviet designers created “socialist” tools and appliances based on Western European “capitalist” brands and designs—which, if compared, were more convenient and functional than those made in the USSR (p. 76). Chapter 3 tackles the emergence of “neodecorativism” in applied art objects (prior to 1965), which later attained a new definition of decorative art. Addressing this concept, Karpova centers mostly on design theorists’ debates and the production of glass art. This chapter contains valuable information on dormitories’ interiors, which, if expanded to all types of living and positioned earlier in the text, would have been helpful in building a stronger contextual foundation. The fourth chapter explores the evaluation criteria and methodologies for design processes conducted by VNIITE between 1965 and the 1970s. The author examines the mass production of watches and clocks for ordinary consumers and such appliances as refrigerators and vacuums, and analyzes their functionality and visual aesthetics as well as their various disadvantages that illustrated the “disorder of things.” This chapter also addresses the issues of waste management, recycling and repurposing, and the recycling propaganda program in the 1980s. The final chapter continues the discussion of decorative art tendencies toward a complexity of forms and design aesthetics. Here Karpova explores decorative art objects (mostly glass and ceramics to a lesser extent) created not for consumers but for art exhibits. These nonutilitarian pieces were “quietly speaking” objects capable of expressing abstract ideas that painters or sculptors could not communicate under an ever-present socialist realist discourse (p. 182).

This monograph is addressed to scholars specializing in Soviet art and design; however, due to its specifically focused subject matter, which presumes that the reader is familiar with the material culture and ways of living in the Soviet Union, this book is less suited for teaching in nonspecialist classes. It lacks a fuller sociohistorical context and supporting visual material to explain why this aes-

thetic revolution in design and applied arts happened. The questions of what exactly was “bad taste,” “bad production,” or “Stalinist design” and why these “old” views did not fit the new productivist agenda remain unanswered. Karpova says little about consumers’ demands; the notions of affordability and availability of luxury goods, such as up-to-date fridges or vacuums, especially in villages or small towns and among people with low incomes; the accessibility of so-called prefabricated apartments; and the real living conditions of the majority of the population of the USSR. Without these crucial contextual details, the book offers an inaccurate picture of Soviet material culture, limited to what was available to elite consumers in the capitals. In addition, the author mentions many lesser-known designers and theoreticians (e.g., Aleksandr Saltykov, Iurii Soloviev, Moisei Kagan, Boris Smirnov, and Karl Kantor) without proper introduction, presuming the reader’s familiarity with them. For additional context, some paramount exhibits, such as the US National Exhibition (1959), *Art Into Life* (1961), and *All-Union Decorative Art Exhibition* (1970), deserve more attention as well.

Additionally, in the introduction, the author claims that “to avoid generalizations about many different republics and regions of the USSR,” her research (and the title of the book) is devoted to Soviet Russia, but throughout the book she turns to Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Baltic designers and their products (p. 15). An even more contentious contradiction is delivered by the cover image, which belongs to a Ukrainian, not Russian, artist. These controversial elisions ultimately pose a timely question about the decolonization of scholarship in relation to what “Soviet Russia” and the “Soviet Union” were. Furthermore, the book’s promise to explore the objects of Soviet design is accomplished only with inconsistent references to the reproduced images. There is a significant lack of correlation between the included images and the text, which unfortunately creates a big gap

between the objects and a reader's understanding of their visual message.

Lastly, I would be particularly interested in seeing a better connection with Russian nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century concepts of art and design, because many of the ideas discussed in the book are rooted in this period. For example, Karpova mentions that interest in the applied arts came to Russia only in the mid-nineteenth century from British art reform; she then moves to the 1930s, overlooking many important changes in the decorative arts and design between the 1860s and 1917. She does not mention the 1900 Paris World Fair, which became a turning point in establishing the status of decorative arts as equal to painting and sculpture, but instead emphasizes that the profession of the applied artist became recognized only in 1953. Or, for example, the author states that in art journals “text always overshadowed visual imagery,” but well before the revolution of 1917 Russian graphic designers experimented with art reproductions and deliberately allowed images to dominate the text (p. 26).[1] These omissions could have been avoided had she added a section on this important intervening period.

Despite some disagreements regarding the interpretation or contextualization of the material, both monographs represent important and trail-blazing contributions to the field. They open a complex set of themes for new research, which is much awaited by scholars of Slavic studies and design history. These books should be valued for establishing new directions in late Soviet visual and material culture studies—and hopefully foreshadow the dramatic increase of both scholarly and general interest in the achievements and limitations of socialist design.

Note

[1]. See, for example, my book *Art Periodical Culture in Late Imperial Russia (1898-1917): Print Modernism in Transition* (Leiden: Brill, 2016),

chap. 2, “The *World of Art* and the Origins of the Print Revival in Late Imperial Russia.”

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