

# WORKSHOPS AND EXHIBITIONS

## RETROTOPIA. DESIGN FOR SOCIALIST INTERIOR SPACES

Claudia Banz and Helena Huber-Doudová

**ABSTRACT:** This exhibition review, in the format of a visual essay, presents a selection of projects shown in the exhibition Retrotopia. Design for Socialist Spaces. Initiated and organized by the Berlin Kunstgewerbemuseum in 2023, Retrotopia was a comprehensive, cooperative project focusing on the role and impact of design in the countries belonging to the former Eastern Bloc and ex-Yugoslavia. Never before have these countries been represented together in one exhibition with their attendant material that helps to outline and raise awareness and understanding of the region's design activities between the 1950s and the 1980s. Eleven design capsules were created, each highlighting two projects: one representing the public space and one the private sphere and the interior. The spectrum of interior projects and objects on display ranged from experimental housing exhibitions and cybernetic living machines to new furniture concepts, modular kitchen furniture, tableware, household tools, and toys for children.

**KEYWORDS:** Socialist interior, Retrotopia, dwelling, standardization, housing exhibition, kitchen design, open form

**INTRODUCTION:** The rationalization movements are among the striking signatures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as is the vision associated with Fordism. Both proposed to regulate social conflicts of interest through social engineering. Economies, societies, cities, and people were to be rationalized in analogy to the machine-controlled processes in factories in order to achieve the greatest possible efficiency.

Standardization, rationalization, and normalization were to shape everyday life in the home and contribute to the development of a new human being in the interwar period. In 1929, Sigfried Giedion, journalistic pioneer and leading theorist of *Neues Bauen* and secretary of CIAM, published the book *Befreites Wohnen (Liberated Living)*, in which he wrote off the old, gloomy, and musty tenement architecture and instead propagated a white, light and airy, translucent, mobile architecture and interior that was to follow the sporting and socio-hygienic imperative of "light, air and openness."

Attempts were made to overcome the housing shortage crisis after World War II by resorting to industrialized construction, also euphemistically referred to by Giedion as 'Wohnford'. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the model of the functional city prevailed. The housing policy objective was to give broad sections of the population access

to affordable housing with a higher standard of living.

'Housing for all' was the slogan in the former socialist countries from the Baltic states to ex-Yugoslavia. Housing policy was seen as a means of promoting social justice and the common good, and comprehensive state programs to create housing were implemented accordingly. The construction site symbolized progress towards a better and socialist future. In everyday life, rationalized construction with prefabricated slabs meant a leap in comfort from poorly renovated old buildings to centrally heated modern apartments with their own bathroom and fitted kitchen. The new housing estates were provided with generous green open spaces for recreation and a tiered infrastructure that included playgrounds, kindergartens, and schools, as well as the provision of everyday necessities such as supermarkets, pharmacies, and doctors.

### EXHIBITION RETROTOPIA LIFTING THE CURTAIN

During the Cold War, design and architecture mutated into a mirror of the geopolitical showdown between the two superpowers; yet beyond political appropriation, there was a sameness in the difference. Designers and architects in both systems were confronted with the same social challenges, worked on similar design questions

and sustainable solutions for the environment, developed comparable ideas, and designed visionary projects that often failed to progress beyond the status of experiment or prototype.

*Retrotopia* exhibition is thus a search for the traces of this parallel revolution, turning the spotlight on the countries of the former Eastern Bloc and ex-Yugoslavia. The Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts) Berlin initiated a co-creation and co-curation process, together with eleven teams based in Tallinn, Vilnius, Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Brno, Bratislava, Kyiv, Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Eisenhüttenstadt. The research process included workshops, conferences, and an exhibition catalog and became a unique experiment connecting the curators to one another. The results of the collaborative research will be published in a digital archive.

## VISUAL ESSAY

This visual essay presents a selection of the projects and objects shown in the eleven *Retrotopia* capsules. The descriptive project texts are taken from the accompanying booklet and from the exhibition catalog; they were written by the respective co-curators of the individual 'design capsules'. These texts have been condensed and revised for this review by Claudia Banz and Helena Huber-Doudová for the DJ Interiors issue *Modern movement interiors in the times of crisis*. The four sub-sections address the following topics: Housing exhibitions as models for living and dream homes; The kitchen as laboratory for a better society; Standardization versus Experiment; and New Utopias.

### HOUSING EXHIBITIONS AS MODELS FOR LIVING AND DREAM HOMES

Housing is one of the most basic human needs, and the achievements of both capitalism and socialism were measured first of all in terms of the level of reconstruction and the provision of homes. The development of new settlements and urban districts was promoted by exhibitions that showcased model dream homes, new kinds of furniture, and new household technologies in the tradition of the housing exhibitions from the 1920s. The postwar period promoted the International Style as a model for future dream interiors.

#### EXHIBITION HOUSING FOR OUR CONDITIONS, LJUBLJANA 1956

*Housing for Our Conditions* was Yugoslavia's first postwar exhibition promoting new lifestyle concepts. Three competitions were launched for a terraced house, an economical sanitary node, and rational mass-produced residential furniture. The winning proposals for a terraced house were presented as full-scale models, all fully equipped with the



01 Exhibition Housing for Our Conditions—Trata apartment by Janez Lajovic, Vladimir Mušič, Anton Pibernik, Savin Sever, Slovenia, Yugoslavia, 1956. © Janez Kalíšnik, Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana, 2023.

latest furniture and fittings, including a laboratory kitchen designed by Branka Tancig. First prize went to the Trata terraced house, designed as a two-story structure of 100 square meters with an external atrium. However, the Trata terraced house was never built [FIGURE 01].

#### EXHIBITION FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD, ZAGREB 1957–1960

Between 1957 and 1960, the *Family and Household* exhibition was held three times on the grounds of the Zagreb Fair. The exhibitions were extremely popular, with the second edition in 1958 attracting more than a million visitors. This edition included a pavilion featuring an 'ideal apartment' presented by architect and designer Bernardo Bernardi [FIGURE 02]. He paid great attention to the functional furnishings of these small living spaces, a two-bedroom apartment of 43.7 square meters for 3-4 people and a three-bedroom apartment of 56 square meters for 4-5 people. The living room featured furniture by Boris Babić and Mario Antonini as well as pieces by Bernardo



02 Exhibition Family and Household—the Ideal Apartment by Bernardo Bernardi, Croatia, Yugoslavia, 1958. © unknown, Croatian History Museum, Zagreb, 2023.



03 Exhibition *neues leben – neues wohnen*: model apartment – dining area by Rudolf Horn, Eberhard Wüstner, Berlin-Pfennpfuhl, Germany, 1962. © Deutsche Photothek / Friedrich Weimer, 2023.

Bernardi and Ferdo Rosić (a newspaper holder and a floor lamp), while the living room of the latter mostly featured items presented at the 1957 Milan Triennial (including furniture, textiles, glass, and porcelain objects), where they won a silver medal.

#### EXHIBITION NEUES LEBEN – NEUES WOHNEN, EAST BERLIN 1962

*Neues leben – neues wohnen* (new life – new dwelling), an exhibition of fifteen furnished flats opened inside the prominent prototype of the building project Wohn- und Erholungsgebiet Umgebung Fennpfuhl (Fennpfuhl Residential and Recreational Area) in East Berlin [FIGURE 03]. The main innovations on the ground floor were the arrangement of the kitchen and bathroom on the inside and a large multifunctional living room alongside the windows. To satisfy the demand for spaciousness, the designers Rudolf Horn, Rudolf Schierz, and Eberhard Wüstner eliminated conventional storage furniture. Instead, the furniture was used as room dividers to define the space. In response to the scarcity of resources, the collective also devised alternatives to the classical use of veneer and covered the furniture with decorative laminate. The designs presented in the exhibition, however, had little direct impact on production.



04 Laboratory Kitchen by Branka Tancig, Slovenia, Yugoslavia, 1953/1954. © Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin, 2023.

#### THE KITCHEN AS LABORATORY FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

Avantgarde architects made the kitchen the starting point for rationalizing domestic design and production, combining the social promise of a better quality of life with a focus on women's interests. The famous *Frankfurt Kitchen* (1926-1927), designed by Grete Schütte Lihotzsky on a 2 x 3 m floor space based on a scientific analysis of housework, became a worldwide influential model after World War II that enabled minimum movement but maximum hygiene. In the postwar period, the famous Kitchen Debate between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev (1959) led, among other things, to a reform of the consumer goods industry in the countries of the former Soviet Union, which also included products of mechanical engineering for the household.

#### BRANKA TANCIG: LABORATORY KITCHEN, 1953/1954 (SLOVENIA)

In former Yugoslavia, Slovenian architect Branka Tancig designed functional and hygienic kitchen furniture during her studies in 1953 [FIGURE 04]. It was commissioned by the Center for the Advancement of Households [Center za napredek gospodinjstva, CZNG] and manufactured by the Maribor Furniture Factory in 1954. The kitchen



consisted of eighteen different modules, which could be freely selected and assembled into a suitable whole. The idea was to have all the pieces of furniture and necessary appliances connected into a continuous line in as small a space as possible to streamline the user's movements. This first Yugoslavian/Slovenian Laboratory Kitchen was exhibited at the Housing for Our Conditions exhibition (1956) in Ljubljana and the Family and Household exhibition (1958) in Zagreb, where its use was demonstrated in an auditorium.

#### STANDARDIZED KITCHEN PROJECT, 1975 (HUNGARY)

In 1972, a group of eight young Hungarian designers launched the Standardized Kitchen Project in order to attain a shift in living quality through the development of kitchenware and furnishings [FIGURE 05]. The design process, in which representatives from industry and commerce were involved from the outset, was divided into three larger phases: 1) thorough exploration of needs, 2) elaboration of design tasks, and 3) organization of production and distribution. The Standardized Kitchen Project was not to be realized in its entirety. The majority of products would remain prototypes. Among the pieces that went into production are the pressed soda glass, an apple grater, and a lemon juicer, designed by Júlia Kovács, and the enameled pans by designers Csaba Asztai and György Soltész.

#### SATURNAS VACUUM CLEANER, 1962–1975 (LITHUANIA)

The iconic Saturnas vacuum cleaner was created by Lithuanian designers and engineers inspired by space-age aesthetics [FIGURE 06]. The production began in 1962 at the Vilnius Electric Welding Equipment Factory. It weighed almost seven kilograms but had three small wheels to make everyday housework easier, aiming to realize Khrushchev's promise in the famous 1959 Kitchen Debate to overtake and surpass America. Alas, in Soviet reality, the design found in private spaces was more depressing than promising, and the acquisition of new, well-functioning, appealing, and useful products like this was a utopian dream.

#### STANDARDIZATION VERSUS EXPERIMENT

The tendency toward housing standardization and typification was applied on multiple levels and to elements: to concrete panels and housing cores, interior fittings, and furniture. This influenced the emergence of a specific phenomenon known as 'prefab-block culture.' However, the monotony and mass production of limited series were its main drawbacks. Even under socialism, there were numerous endeavors to overcome the monotony of living standards and lifestyle: in exhibitions as fields of experimentation, projects officially tendered by state institutions; however, most of them never went beyond the prototype stage.



05 Standardized Kitchen Project: Dish set by Csaba Ásztai, György Soltész; Lemon juicer and apple grater by Júlia Kovács, Budapest, Hungary, 1975; Schematic drawings for a basic series of ceramic tools, Hungary, 1974; Photorepro: Művészet [Art], 8, 1977, p. 5. © Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin, 2023.



06 Saturnas vacuum cleaner by Vytautas Didžiulis, Almantas Laužadis, and Arkadijus Šapiro, Lithuania, 1962–1975. © Algimantas Aleksandras Brazaitis, Central State Archives, Vilnius, 2023.

#### GERALD NEUSSER: RADIKÁL WALL UNIT, 1971 (CZECHOSLOVAKIA)

The living room became the space receiving the most aesthetic care in the prefab home, not least because of its social function and its representation of proud owners. At its heart was the TV set, an item owned by 98% of Czechoslovak households in 1976. Apart from the television and the car, the wall unit, which dominated the living room, was an equally important status symbol and proof of social respectability. In the design of the Radikál wall unit, architect Gerald Neusser based the aesthetic effect of the unit on the contrast of the veneer frame and the clean white surfaces of laminated panels [FIGURE 07].



07 Radikál wall unit by Gerald Neusser, Czechoslovakia, 1971. © Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin, 2023.

#### EXHIBITION RUUM JA VORM, 1969 (ESTONIA)

Ruum ja Vorm (space and form) was an exhibition of experimental work first held at the Tallinn Art Hall in 1969, with subsequent editions in later years [FIGURE 08]. The first edition's keywords were experimentation, standardization, and the combination of these towards a sense of individuality. As its initiators, i.a. Bruno Tomberg, wrote: "The aim of this exhibition is to offer new analyses of spatial organization and the material-spatial environment that transcend the boundaries of everyday practical tasks" (Vello Asi and Väino Tamm, "Näitus Ruum ja Vorm", in: *Sirp ja Vasar*, 1969, 4 April, p. 1). The concept of using

standard elements to create non-standard solutions was presented as an open-ended invitation to both designers and exhibition visitors, showcasing the designer's research process and highlighting new ideas in form, materials, and colors, along with the potential for individuality within the standard toolbox.

#### POLYFORM, 1970 (EAST GERMANY)

In 1967, the Central Institute of Design in East Berlin commissioned the development of a "modular furniture system for the formation of a wide range of space-defining structures for dwelling". According to interior designer Karl-Heinz Burmeister, "Polyform was the order of the day. In the building industry, it was all about dwelling with no interior walls" (Karl-Heinz Burmeister, conversation with Silke Ihden-Rothkirch, 22 June 2022). Polyform combined structural forms ranging from small, free-standing pieces of furniture to space-defining, space-delimiting case goods usable from all four sides [FIGURE 09]. All body elements were interchangeable. The innovative modular furniture system consisted of panels and so-called profile nodes: square tracks into which the panels could be inserted on the four long sides. Polyform was presented in the important GDR design magazine *form+zweck* in 1970. The magazine illustrations suggest the successful development of a product for contemporary residential needs. However, Polyform remained just a prototype that never went into production.

#### TERESA KRUSZEWSKA: CHILDREN'S TOYS, 1975 (POLAND)

The designs by Polish architect Teresa Kruszevska aimed to enable the child to learn about space using basic solids through an open and variable arrangement of elements.



08 Ruum ja Vorm, concept and design by Eha Reitel, Maia Laul, Kärt Voogre, and Saima Veidenberg; Elements designed by Bruno Tomberg, Estonian Socialist Soviet Republic, 1969. © Boris Mäemets, Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, Tallinn, 2023.



09 Polyform by designers' collective Karl-Heinz Burmeister, Hans Froberg, Klaus-Dieter Mädzulat, Herbert Pohl, Lothar Walk, East Germany, 1968-70. © Maria Steinfeldt, Zentralinstitut für Gestaltung des DAMW, Stiftung Haus der Geschichte, Berlin, 2024.





10 Nesting dolls system (left) and the multifunctional ball (right, reproduction from 2011); both by Teresa Kruszezwska, Poland, 1975. © Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin, 2023.

The nesting dolls system was used as equipment for day rooms at the Children's Health Institute in Warsaw [FIGURE 10]. The system could be used by young children as seats, tables, mazes, walls, game boards, etc. The 'multifunctional ball' consisted of three elements: if assembled, it forms a ball that the child can play with, but if disassembled, the separate parts can serve as seats, barricades, etc. Neither the furniture-toys nor the ball have a permanently defined function; Kruszezwska was interested in shaping the human imagination through actions that used simple solids in space. She employed an open form that left children free to decide their own surroundings.

## NEW UTOPIAS

The vision of a better future as a solution to the present crisis condition is inscribed in the DNA of Modernism. The Scientific and Technological Revolution in the Socialist Bloc states was to solve the problems of humankind. Particular scenarios of the societal impact of the technological revolution were outlined by Radovan Richta in the research paper *Civilisation at the crossroads* (1967) or in the *House of the future* (1976) by Alexander Ryabushin. Ryabushin, a co-author of the Domestic Information Machine project, considered the 'smart home' amenities crucial and proposed a model of the house-cinema and house-stage, an immersive environment, which changed depending on the inhabitant's moods and preferences. At the other end of the spectrum, with the growing damage to the natural environment through the ruthless extractivism of natural resources, the bio-utopia by Iosif Karakis presented an exceptional approach.

### VNIITE: DOMESTIC INFORMATION MACHINE (DIM), 1969–1972 (UDSSR)

The Domestic Information Machine (DIM) project by the All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics



11 Domestic Information Machine (DIM) project, VNIITE design team—Evgeny Bogdanov, Vladimir Paperny, Vladimir Rezvin, Alexander Ryabushin, A. Sergeev, and POZITRON Leningrad Research and Development Association, GIRIKOND Research Institute, Soviet Union, 1969–1972. © Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin, 2023.

(VNIITE) sought to assess how technological progress might alter the relationship of the socialist citizen to their home and the objects within it [FIGURE 11]. By emphasizing the role of information exchange and the social agency of objects of communication, the machine's designers imagined a restructuring of the Soviet domestic interior linked to the wider world facilitated by an electronic infrastructure of machines. According to the proposal, the bulky computer systems were supposed to be concealed inside modular containers resembling furniture items or cabinets. With their various designs for the DIM, VNIITE aimed at imagining a socialist information age and questioning pre-conceived notions of the collective as well as the nature of consumption in the Soviet Union.

### JOSIF KARAKIS: HOUSING OF THE NEAR FUTURE, 1977 (UKRAINE)

In 1977, Ukrainian architect Josif Karakis started working on his visionary *Housing of the Near Future* project for Kyiv. His philosophy was based on the idea that the human, as a biological being, should not just live alongside nature, exploiting it, but be embedded in the environment. During the last years of his life, Karakis lived at his country house and spent most of his time in close



12 *Housing of the Near Future*, Iosif Karakis. Model produced in cooperation with Alex Bykov, Rostyslav Bakhtiarov, and the Museum of Contemporary Art NGO, Kyiv, Ukraine. © David von Becker, Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin, 2023.



13 Balcony Dreams by Lutz Brandt, *Das Magazin*, 3/1983, Archive of Lutz Brandt, Germany.  
© Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin, 2023.

contact with nature. That was where he developed his projects and photographed the resulting models amidst grass, stones, flowers, and trees [FIGURE 12].

#### LUTZ BRANDT: BALCONY DREAMS, 1983 (EAST GERMANY)

The humorous drawings by wall painter Lutz Brandt, which he published under the title *Balcony Dreams* [FIGURE 13] in the popular monthly magazines *Neue Berliner Illustrierte* and *Das Magazin* (East Germany between the 1970s and 1983), are symptomatic of the attempt to mitigate the inhospitality of functionally planned cities. They also reflect the postmodern spirit and the longing for the playful and non-rational. In these drawings, Brandt presented fictitious DIY ideas for design, greenery, and energy production, all on the balconies of the prefab housing block.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Retrotopia. Design for Socialist Spaces* was on view at the Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin from March 24 until July 16, 2023. An exhibition catalog was also published: Claudia Banz (Ed.): *Retrotopia. Design for Socialist Spaces*. Kettler Verlag: Dortmund, 2023. The digital archive of *Retrotopia* is online: <https://retrotopia.eu>.

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