THE SECRET OF SOVIET INDUSTRIAL DESIGN:
1945 through 1991

Were the Soviet post-war backgrounds encouraging for the birth of industrial design right after the World War II had been over?

No.

Did Nikita Khrushchev’s liberalization reforms affect politics in the Soviet Union and its social setting to the extent that made industrial design truly indispensable?

No.

Were there any prerequisites in the Soviet Union for the industrial design development?

No.

Had there been industrial design as a professional occupation in the Soviet Union over the period of 1945 through 1991? Yes. And it became a unique phenomenon in the world industrial design history.

Yes, industrial design did exist in the USSR despite and contrary to strongly adverse environments due to a man who made it possible. All the more so, the Soviet industrial design gradually shaped up as a serious, resourceful, and distinguished school of its own. Authentic creative efforts in Russia have always been and are keeping on in defiance of existing backgrounds. Due to a man.

This man was Yuri Soloviev.

The background for developing the Soviet industrial design was the utter lack of proactive vision and the rejection of artistic novelty by officials. In 1960s, regardless of those and other hindering realities, a young artist, Yuri Soloviev, bridged those gaps thanks to his remarkable innate faculty – convincing people in the success of prospective endeavours. His attempts to find support
from senior officials were successful. For the first time ever, Yu. Soloviev got the chance to expose the world to his own creativity and artistic potential, as well as to new vistas which he believed the future held for the industrial design profession.

That was exactly the time when the first Soviet industrial design samples appeared: a railway carriage, an atomic ice-breaker, a nuclear submarine, river boats and inland-waters passenger vessels, and a sea yacht for the US President Dwight Eisenhower. In all these projects Yuri Soloviev acted as a designer, except for the Eisenhower’s yacht which prompted Soloviev’s both designing and engineering faculties come together. In fact, when designing the sea yacht he acted as a marine engineer; the yacht was being built in anticipation of the US President Eisenhower visit to Russia. No visit occurred. However, the yacht was highly assessed by the-then Soviet Party leader Nikita Khruschev who reflected on it as follows, “A gorgeous yacht, but looks too bourgeois.”

That time on, Yuri Soloviev clearly positioned himself as an amazingly prolific achiever, the real doer implementing seemingly impracticable ideas. The best illustration is a unique and internationally unrivaled institutional network which he founded: 10 branches affiliated under the Moscow-based headquarters with 400 design bureaus covering various industries of the Soviet national economy; the underlying methods of those bureaus were consistent with the Moscow headquarters strategic design development methodologies. The country-wide institutional network with its branches in major Soviet cities was named VNIITE – All-Union Industrial Design Institute. In fact, at that point in time, the word ‘design’ was inexistent in the Russian language; for lack of it, ‘technical aesthetics’ was used instead.

An integrating nature of the industrial design predetermined the very content of VNIITE activities covering quite a range of professions: industrial designers, artists, engineers, ergonomists, psychologists, and sociologists, as well as design historians and analysts who collaborated as one team. Moreover, VNIITE functioned as a vocational training center commensurable with a higher educational institution. No less noteworthy is the fact that VNIITE was a Soviet institution which, however, embodied an island of intellectual and creative freedom even in the gloomiest times of Leonid Brezhnev’s autocratic ruling.
Yuri Soloviev launched the Soviet industrial design into the international industrial design arena by hosting The ICSID (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) Congress in Moscow in 1975. Later, at the Dublin Congress, he was elected ICSID President. His another initiative was a continuous series of ‘Interdesign’ international project seminars conducted worldwide, including the USSR, with the view of engaging industrial designers, architects and artists from different continents representing different political and cultural backgrounds within one project industrial design team. Amazingly, all those efforts were made during the ongoing cold war between the West and the Soviet Union.

Of all the wonders worked out by Yuri Soloviev, the most incredible phenomenon was himself – a self-made man ahead of his time. By outperforming the many top talents, he set a sharp contrast to the general professional milieu where he had matured. A splendid Russian aristocrat, handsome and charismatic socialite with flawless English, he himself personified a major secret of the Soviet industrial design.

... An outstanding talent... Immense might of opponents... Remarkable people along the road of life...

Industrial design is no miracle in the West – another customary job, while in Russia – the other way round. Industrial design was held by Providence for Yuri Soloviev’s destiny: it fell within his mission and eventually became his cross which he had been carrying during his entire life feeling rewarded, blessed, and happy. The feeling of Divine Blessing had never failed him. Enlightened by a strong and subtle personality with clear professional vision, people around Yuri Soloviev had always felt insightful and accomplished. They did. They still do enlightened by the memory of his spiritual vigor.

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