

Indefinite Faces of Modernism: Notes on Design in Interwar and Socialist Romania

Mirela Duculescu

PhD, Assistant Professor, National University of Arts, Bucharest, Romania
mduculescu@yahoo.com

English translation: Ioana Miruna Voiculescu and Mirela Duculescu

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Introductory Notes

This research investigates the connections and intersections between the notion of Modernism and the development of Romanian design in the interwar and the socialist periods in relation to the European and international context. It also rehabilitates the history of Romanian design, born under the communist regime, suggesting the manner in which a history seen as *minor* and *peripheral* is historically and theoretically an integral part of the so-called *major*, hierarchized, and non-inclusive Western canonical history of modern industrial design. Furthermore, this points to the fact that the revealing of recent and fragile history of Romanian design coincides with the fifty-year anniversary of the first Romanian higher education program of design created in 1969 at “Nicolae Grigorescu” Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest.¹

Concepts such as *modernization*, *modernity* and *Modernism*, all linked to the Modern Movement via conceptual, historical and stylistic references, help us to understand cultural evolutions in different regions, in a variety of sociopolitical and economic systems subjected, not least, to the linguistic (post)colonialism of the English language (with *design*, a word with Latin roots, being in use as early as the sixteenth century). Modernity, which overturned the old order, set for itself the goal to always go forward, facing the future, while the notion of modern design, associated with social reform, upheld the importance of providing everyone (utopian) access to the objects that facilitate everyday life, industrialization, progress, and innovation.

Historically, the Romanian design scene was characterized by intersections with elements of Modernist philosophy – often visible in the artistic avant-garde and architecture manifestations. These experimental intersections could be interpreted as the expression of a Modernism that was not programmatically embraced but sporadically touched on in both theory and practice.

Aiming to erase the past, socialist ideology took upon itself to transform humans, the natural recipients of design products, into socialist citizens, with a socialist personality, turning this into a project in itself – in fact, a sociopolitical experiment.

The complexity of the notion of modernity is revealed in its Western – first Eurocentric, later Americentric – understanding and univocal definition, which does not lack some built-in omissions and possible contradictions.² Seen through the ideological lens of cultural education

1 See the exhibition *50 Design UNArte: o istorie vizuală a școlii de la București (1969-2019)* [50 Design UNArte: A Visual History of the Bucharest School (1969-2019)], project coordinator Dinu Dumbrăviciian, curators Mirela Duculescu and Cristina Sabău, visual identity Radu Manelici, National University of Arts, Bucharest (Bucharest: National Museum of Art of Romania, Oct 24 - Nov 29, 2019).

2 Tony Fry, “A Geography of Power: Design History and Marginality,” in eds. Victor Margolin & Richard Buchanan, *The Idea of Design* (Chicago: The MIT Press, 1995): 204-218. Anna Calvera, “Local, Regional, National, Global and Feedback: Several Issues To Be Faced With Constructing Regional Narratives,” *Journal of Design History* 18, 4 (2005): 371-383.

in Eastern Europe – as part of a larger cultural context, with an emphasis on the role of design in everyday life of societies transitioning to communism – design is currently a very researched topic, as well as a reason for revisiting the hierarchy of modern design, with Modernism itself being under the researchers' scrutiny as a West-European theoretical construct. Consequently, any endeavor to parse out the intersections of Romanian socialist design and Modernism is also an important historiographical contribution in line with the recent interest in reclaiming and integrating socialist design within the broader context and the studies of socialism and modern design.³

The Modern Movement and the Canon of the History of Modern Design

The most persistent model of modern design history, written in 1936 and very influential until the 1970s, albeit presenting the usual questionable approaches, comes from Britain and belongs to Nikolaus Pevsner,⁴ one of the first scholars to tackle this topic and relate design to industrialization and the Modern Movement. Western European design is generally seen as part of the paradigm of modernity.

Pevsner was among the first art historians to attempt to build a theory of design, following a historical and conceptual tradition leading from William Morris to Walter Gropius, the founder of the first modern design school, the Bauhaus (1919-1933).⁵ In Pevsner's account, factors as varied as mass industrialization, crafts, mechanization, standardization, and innovation are presented as equal in terms of importance.⁶ His theory of aspects of design (definition, practice, practitioners, factors that influenced it) nonetheless became a canonical history, although its author might not have intended it to become one.

Interestingly, the first edition of his seminal work was published by Faber and Faber in 1936 as *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, whereas the second edition, published in 1949 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was titled *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*. This is illustrative of how the authority of a canonical model of modern design featuring American architecture and design at its center was established and then maintained. It was during this time that MoMA promoted its Department of Architecture and Design and developed its own public policy on design, disseminated through publications, competitions and exhibitions, where design, democracy and mass production were presented as interconnected. It is likely that this was encouraged by the founding of the New Bauhaus in 1937, in Chicago, under the leadership of László Moholy-Nagy, who had emigrated to the U.S. after the Berlin Bauhaus School was closed by the Nazis in 1933.

Pevsner's achievement consisted in his study of the influence of the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements on modernity – understood as linear progress –, as well as in his insight that there was a link between the roots of the Modern Movement and the nineteenth-century design revolution. In addition, he brought together information and ideas about crafts, machines and new materials, on the one hand, and architects and industrial designers perceived as individual personalities that took part in the melting pot of the Modern Movement, on the other hand. In short, Pevsner included the attributes of modernity in the first recorded history of how design took shape as a discipline in its own right.

3 David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds., *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008); David Crowley and S. Reid, *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2000), etc.

4 Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983) was born in Leipzig, Germany and moved to London in 1933, fleeing the rise of National Socialism. Here he studied British architecture and design.

5 *Bauhaus – die Hochschule für Gestaltung* was organized according to an experimental, anti-academic model, where students and teachers, i.e., the masters and the apprentices, would experiment together, for the benefit of society, learning and training as a team in a research laboratory.

6 Nikolaus Pevsner, "Theories of Art from Morris to Gropius," in *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth: Middlesex Penguin Books, 1960), 19-39.

On revisiting Pevsner's history of design, one finds that the countries of Northern and Eastern Europe are altogether missing from his account, along with other voices and socioeconomic forces that helped create and shape early design. Behind his assumption that the history of design had begun in Western Europe stood geographical and politico-economic rationale. For instance, the Swedish and Finnish theorists, architects and designers – who helped create modern design – were excluded by omission from Pevsner's narrative. On the other hand, there was no mention whatsoever of the V(k)hutemas' (Higher Art and Technical Studios) design events and Constructivist experiments in Soviet Russia.⁷ Like the Bauhaus, the V(k)hutemas was formed by the merger of two existing schools, one of applied arts and the other of fine arts, being one of the first institutions to train artist-engineers (designers) using modern methods.

As Victor Margolin, one of the most prominent contemporary historians and theorists of design, claimed as early as 2005 the notion of world history of design is geographically and economically restricted to the industrialized regions – one of the reasons why Western design does not include non-Western approaches to the history of design.⁸ Margolin argues for an inclusive notion of world history of design which would open up the current “limited definition of design” to include “the conception and planning of visual and material culture” outside the colonial boundaries of the industrialized West,⁹ the same way architectural history and the history of cinema have emancipated by including Asian, non-Western narratives.

It is worth mentioning that within the so-called Socialist Bloc, of which Romania was part, there was a differentiation, a non-monolithic practice of what was heterogeneously defined, from both the inside and the outside, as socialist design – a theoretical construct that referred to the design practiced in societies governed by Soviet-inspired, socialist principles – in opposition with and separate from capitalist design.¹⁰

Modernist (Design) Intersections in Interwar Romania

Efforts to industrialize Romania had older roots. Theoretical and public debates (1900-1944) centred on the relationship between arts, social reform, national statehood, industrialization, and modernity.¹¹

The spirit of modernity in interwar Romania is found in both the artistic avant-garde and engineering and field of inventions. Allegedly, the first aerodynamic streamlined automobile with wheels mounted inside the body was designed by the Romanian engineer Aurel Persu (1890-1977) in 1923 and patented in Germany (1923) and the U.S. (1927), almost ten years before the aerodynamic Dymaxion car designed by Richard Buckminster Fuller.

Around the same time, a local interest in the Bauhaus School, the pioneering institution that taught and trained architects and modern designers, emerged as Romanian students started applying to study there. For example, the Romanian Oskar Reimer from Timișoara attended

7 Founded in 1920 in Moscow, after the “Great October Socialist Revolution” (1917), the workshops were established by a Soviet decree from Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “to prepare master artists of the highest qualifications for industry, and builders and managers for professional-technical education.” See *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, 3rd ed., vol. 5 (Moscow: Sovetskaia Enziklopediia Publishing House, 1970), 530.

8 Victor Margolin, “A World History of Design and the History of the World,” *Journal of Design History* 18.3 (2005): 235-243.

9 *Ibid.*, 239.

10 For example, the GDR (German Democratic Republic) school of design claimed to be the heir of the Bauhaus, a legacy that was disputed by postwar Western and Eastern Europe. See Eli Rubin, “The Form of Socialism without Ornament. Consumption, Ideology, and the Fall and Rise of Modernist Design in the German Democratic Republic,” *Journal of Design History* 19 2 (2006): 155-168.

11 Mirela Duculescu, “Romanian Design,” in *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Design*, edited by Clive Edwards, volume 3 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing House, 2016), 168.



Fig.1: Max Herman Maxy, kettles, silvered brass, 1920s. Mimi Șaraga Maxy Collection, Brăila Museum

the preliminary course (*Vorlehre*) at the Bauhaus during the winter semester of 1929.¹² Also, an alternative education system was created for what would be later called design, namely the private Academy of Decorative Arts (1924-1929), led by Andrei Vespremie and by the painter Max Herman Maxy, which aimed to be in synchrony with the European framework understood as a sign of modernity.¹³ Originally founded, it seems, by Max Herman Maxy (a significant promoter of the “Integralist” movement), according to the Bauhaus model of education, under the name of The Studio of Deconstructivist Art, it represented a significant moment for Romania’s integration into the European avant-garde.¹⁴

Maxy was interested in the applied arts and constructed a series of home interior design objects – furniture, small household items (teapots, flower vases, ashtrays etc.), carpets, etc.¹⁵ He experimented with different materials for useful everyday items — as in the Bauhaus workshops — combining geometrical forms related to modernist Art Deco aesthetics. (Fig. 1)

12 Oskar Reimer was born in Timișoara on August 5, 1910. Unfortunately, I could not find any further information on his life and his activity at the Bauhaus. See Folke F. Dietzsch, Dipl. Ing. *Die Studierenden am Bauhaus*, dissertation (A), Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar, 1990, *Anlage 1: Zusammenstellung der Studierenden nach der Datenbank Bauhaus*, 238, Bauhaus Archive in Berlin. We formulate the hypothesis that Oskar Reimer took the preliminary course at the Bauhaus but did not continue his studies.

13 “Academia de arte decorative,” *Contemporanul* 52 (1925): 7. In 1949, Maxy becomes the director of the National Museum of Art of Romania. Maxy recalls his allegedly visit to the Bauhaus Dessau in an interview in 1971, see Irina Cărăbaș, “The Shadow of the Object. Modernity and Decoration in Romanian Art,” in *(Dis)continuities. Fragments of the Romanian Modernity in the First Half of the 20th Century*, ed. Carmen Popescu (Bucharest: Simetria, 2010), 101-140.

14 Carmen Popescu, ed., “M.H. Maxy – Arta ‘interiorului modern’,” in *Spațiul modernității românești 1906-1947* (Bucharest: Fundația Arhitect design, 2011), 62-63.

15 Alina-Ruxandra Mircea, “Arhitectura, mașina și interiorul modernist. Note despre mobilierul și obiectele de artă aplicată proiectate de Max Herman Maxy,” *Arhitectura* 2 644 (2013): 42-47.

The engine of Modernism in Romania and the initiator of an important exhibition in 1924, *Contimporanul*, Marcel Janco was an architect who promoted different types of modernist furniture and theories of International Modernism in the avant-garde magazine *Contimporanul*. The Romanian exhibition took place in the same year as the Deutscher Werkbund's *Form ohne Ornament* in Stuttgart, which rejected the historical ornament promoting modern architecture and design instead.

One notable exception and a myth at the same time is the first Romanian car – “affordable for a large number of citizens”¹⁶ – manufactured in 1946 in Reșița, at the factory owned by the tycoon (engineer) Nicolae Malaxa, “the popular automobile (...) that can fit five people, two big suitcases, two small suitcases, transporting them at a speed of 105 km/hour.” The body of the car was designed by the architect Stan Bortnowski,¹⁷ and the prototype was constructed by Romanian engineers and technicians under the supervision of engineer Petru Carp. Sporting a modern, aerodynamic shape and an elegant line, probably inspired by soft shell design, the automobile used many innovations as it was meant for rational, serial production, which, however, never materialized – the reinforced body made of steel pipes welded together, the engine placed at the rear along with the differential and the gearbox, the engine cooling system on the ceiling. (Fig. 2)

16 Stan Bortnowski, “Automobilul Românesc ‘Malaxa’,” *Revista Tehnică. Comunicații și Lucrări Publice* 1 (July 1947): 41-43.

17 The documents belonging to the architect Stan Bortnowski (1914-2009) are found in his son's archive in Bucharest (architect Ștefan Bortnowski).

Fig. 2: Arch. Stan Bortnowski, The Malaxa automobile: initial perspective drawing, ca. 1944 (below), (following page, above) design process materials, (following page, below) functional car, 1946





The car was the outcome of research carried out at the Aviation Arsenal/ASAM [Administration of Aviation and Navy Establishments] in Cotroceni, IAR [Romanian Aeronautic Industry] in Braşov, and the N. Malaxa Studies Society in Bucharest where:

“twenty builders and specialized engineers joined forces and minds to produce the first Romanian automobile. This automobile will certainly not be the most luxurious, or perfect, but it will be nonetheless our automobile, suitable for our wallets and our roads as we know them (...).”¹⁸

This attempt to offer the first affordable automobile produced by the Romanian industry, at the same time a useful object and a symbol of industrial progress (a luxury item at the beginning of the twentieth century), evokes both Henry Ford's economic policy and an ideology akin to that of the National Socialist policies focused on manufacturing “the first people's automobiles” (*Volkswagen* in Hitler's Germany, *Trabant* in the D.D.R., *Lada* in the U.S.S.R., and *Lăstun* in the Socialist Republic of Romania).

Nicolae Malaxa also worked with Horia Creangă, one of the most important Romanian modernist architects, to build his industrial architecture (automotive factory, 1936-1939, and steel pipe factory, 1936-1938) and with his closest collaborator, Haralamb “Bubi” Georgescu (a significant Romanian modernist architect, established in the U.S.A. in 1947). Horia Creangă and his team were involved in designing the chassis and interiors of locomotives.¹⁹

The local manifestation of the echoes of Modernism in the interwar period and the effort to industrialize the country, in an attempt to move beyond the agrarian economy, gave rise to singular attempts of original Romanian design.

On the Notion of Industrial Aesthetics / Design

One of the main characteristics of the postwar period, which was marked by the nationalization of private property, was the focus on heavy industry as part of the socialist state's five-year plans, as well as the production of consumer goods and household items. Some of these items were original creations, while others were copies or alterations of foreign items or items produced under product licenses.

There were at least two directions for action that worked as catalysts for the emergence of design higher education in 1970s Romania: the state officials and the education professionals, to which overlapping interests and possible connections in the right places were added, as the creation of a design department in a centralized state required the “blessing” of the political apparatus. Also, parallel to arguing in favor of the emergence of the discipline of design in Romania, debates, discussions, and round tables were organized around the definition of design, which had been for a while referred to as *industrial aesthetics* (mirroring the French understanding²⁰ but above all the Soviet one²¹).

18 Ştefan Bortnowski's archive. The prototype of the Malaxa automobile is likely to have been manufactured in Reşiţa, at a factory nationalized on June 11, 1948, along with other factories owned by Nicolae Malaxa, becoming the property of the Romanian socialist state (the Malaxa locomotive factories in Bucharest and Reşiţa become 23 August Works and the Malaxa steel pipes factory in Bucharest becomes Republica Factory).

19 Radu Patrulius, *Horia Creangă – omul şi opera* (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1980), 56-57.

20 According to the definition and theory of French designer Jacques Viénot (1893-1959), the phrase *esthétique industrielle* (industrial aesthetics) stood for *industrial design* from 1950 to 1970, emphasizing the beautiful at the expense of industrial output. *L'Institut d'Esthétique Industrielle* [The Institute of Industrial Aesthetics] founded by Viénot in 1951 edited the famous *Esthétique industrielle* magazine, renamed *Design – industrie* as late as 1967.

21 The phrase *technical / industrial aesthetics* comes from the Russian *tekhnicheskaya estetika* which rendered the idea of a Soviet industrial design that used scientific methods, an idea that became entrenched in 1962 with the creation of the VNIITE (All-Union Scientific Research Institute of Industrial

These principles and ideas were promoted by people in management positions in the state apparatus, by Marxist-trained aestheticians, and by an ambiguous figure, an opportunist with ambitions as a Party activist ([engineer?] Iulian Crețu), who held management positions in the Ministry of Light Industry and attempted to promote industrial aesthetics and to disseminate the idea of the beautiful in relation to the products of light industry.

The Western English origin of the term “design” complicates the history of the field, which is marked by difficulties and uncertainties: the word *design* (sometimes spelled *dizain* in Romanian) entered the everyday vocabulary in 1974, at the time of the National Design Seminar. Thitherto, terms such as *industrial aesthetics* or *industrial art* or *industrial forms* or *useful forms* had been used. As a result, for a long time the terms *artist working in industry*, *artist decorator*, *industrial creator*, *draughtsman* and *constructor* were the professional equivalents in Romania.

A significant factor was the convergence between design theory and design pedagogy as promoted in specialized magazines – with *Arta* being the main outlet, as well as a few short-lived publications containing resources like *Estetica Industrială (Design)*²² – and put into practice by the Timișoara Sigma group – Constantin Flondor, Ștefan Bertalan, Doru Tulcan as its most prominent members.²³

Romanian design specialists looked at the design-related activity in the West, the Bauhaus, and even closer at what was happening in the GDR. The interest in the Bauhaus is visible in the theoretical studies on Tomas Maldonado at the Ulm School of Design and the postwar followers of the Bauhaus in the West.²⁴

During the *Design–cultură–civilizație, definire, strategie, impact social* colloquium dedicated to design and organized in 1979 by *Arta* magazine²⁵ together with the Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest, two camps stood out: the theorists – art historians, sociologists, etc. – and the practitioners, with diverging approaches to the definition of design and the designer.

The former used definitions and arguments borrowed from Western literature and peppered with the socialist ideology of the New Man, while the latter were more pragmatic, drawing on their teaching practice and actual work experience in the industry.

Theoretically, and ideally, design was a field of culture that helped create the New Man in everyday life and improve the quality of life, as well as a must for every economy based on industrialization and productivity: “design is a social and cultural good” inextricably tied to quality²⁶; “[d]esign is indispensable to any and all processes of modernization of production”²⁷; “an inexorable necessity for societies that built themselves an industry.”²⁸

On the other hand, specialists like Ion Bitzan, the head of the Department of Design in Bucharest (1977-1990), defined their profession, in between the lines, as an ideology-free field, owing more to functionality, economics and aesthetics, where the concrete stages of planning, distribution and marketing reflect the complexity of conception in the design process. Design solves problems, involves responsibility, and, as a profession, it must be visionary and enduring.²⁹

Design). Dmitry Azrikan, “VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism or Plato’s Academy of Design?,” *Design Issues* 15 3 (Autumn 1999): 45-77.

22 Published from 1971 to 1973 by the Art and Literary Theory and History editorial board at the Centre for Information and Resources in Social and Political Sciences, Bucharest.

23 Constantin Flondor, “Atitudini spre design,” in *Seminarul Național de Design* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1974), 221.

24 Victor Ernst Mașek, “Cu Max Bense despre sistemul fundamentării științifice a artei,” *Arta* 1 (1974): 2-3.

25 *Arta* 11-12 (1979): 29. This was a double issue, entirely dedicated to design, most likely celebrating ten years since the creation in 1969 of the first design higher education program in Romania.

26 Vlad Calboreanu and Francisc Echeriu, “Design și dezvoltare,” in *Seminarul Național de Design* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1974), 25-39.

27 Victor Ernest Mașek, *Designul și calitatea vieții* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1988).

28 Paul Petrescu, “Expoziția de Industrial Design in Elveția,” *Arta* 2 (1971): 37.

29 *Arta* 11-12 (1979): 29.

It cannot be a mere coincidence that Giulio Carlo Argan's *Walter Gropius e la Bauhaus* [Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus] (Einaudi, Milano, 1951) was translated and published by the *Meridiane* Publishing House in 1976. This can be interpreted as an official acknowledgment of the Bauhaus principles and the specialists' preoccupation to disseminate them widely. In the note to the Romanian edition, signed "the Publisher" (sic!), we read about the "industrial aesthetic activism" of the Bauhaus School and how "Walter Gropius understands it very well, while Giulio Carlo Argan makes a point of it, that the industrial aesthetic activity is a rational and ideal means of building an equitably organized society, which can very well be the main factor of progress for humanity, as long as a moral justification is embedded in it."³⁰

The Bauhaus School Experimental Pedagogy – Timișoara's Fine Arts High School

The key *avant la lettre* moment in the evolution of Romanian design was the activity of the "Constructivists" at the Fine Arts High School in Timișoara, from 1970 to 1974, the genuine spearhead and promoter of Bauhaus-inspired pedagogical experiments. Andreea Flondor's excellent study tries to identify the core elements of the pedagogy and the spirit of the Timișoara school and to systematize the documents preserved from that time: the experimental curriculum used from 1970 to 1974 and its echoes over the following decade.³¹

At the heart of the new curriculum was the Grammar of Forms or the Study of Form as the basis of any serious art education, a model later replicated by the Department of Industrial Forms at "Nicolae Grigorescu" Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest. From Flondor we learn that: "The Study of Form was taught consistently in the four years of secondary education, even as the students followed their own specializations, as it was deemed a discipline centered on study and research. It had a formative purpose very much like the Bauhaus' *Vorlehre* (preliminary course)."³² The activity at the Fine Arts High School in Timișoara is detailed in one of the official specialized publications of that time, *Estetica Industrială* (Industrial Aesthetics),³³ describing the members of the Sigma I group, who taught at the school, as a true "force of production."³⁴

Industrial Forms / Design Higher Education in Bucharest (1969) and Cluj-Napoca (1971): Bauhaus-Related Syllabi

The emergence of the Romanian school of design and the use of an appropriate terminology are connected with the "openness" that the Communist Party allowed itself over the period of one decade (1964-1974). This was in conjunction with the legitimization of the profession of designer in socialist Romania to which contributed the efforts of architects educated in the modernist spirit, specialists in the field of art and representatives of the authorities (who promoted the notion of design in direct relation to socialist industrialization) convinced of the need for design in industry and eager to improve the quality of life.

There were endless debates regarding the most appropriate framework of integrating a design school: Fine Arts, Architecture, or Polytechnical School. In 1969, around the same time as the

30 Carlo Giulio Argan, *Walter Gropius și Bauhaus-ul*, translation from the Italian by Sanda Șora after the 1951 edition (Bucharest: Editura Meridiane, 1976), 5-6.

31 Andreea Flondor Palade, "O nouă viziune în învățământul de artă românesc. Liceul de arte plastice din Timișoara (1960 -1980)," PhD diss., West University of Timișoara, 2010.

32 Ibid.

33 The publication, also known as *Caiet de documentare selectivă* [Notebook of selected sources], was in print from 1971 to 1974 at the National Institute for Technical Information and Resources, first in collaboration with the Committee for Industrial Aesthetics in Bucharest. The publication was designed as an anthology of source materials providing up-to-date literature from the technical field.

34 Iulian Crețu, "Liceul de arte plastice Timișoara," *Estetica Industrială* 7 (1973): 401.

Chair for the Study of Form (STUFO) at the Institute of Architecture in Bucharest was set up, the Department of Industrial Forms, later known on and off as the Department of Design, was established at the Faculty of Decorative Arts of the Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest (because the new discipline was related to the human being as much as fine arts). Its structure would be preserved mostly unchanged throughout time, along with its programs in set design, textiles, ceramics, glasswork and metalwork.

The Bucharest Department of Design was the result of sustained efforts by a group of committed practitioners, architects and artists, especially painters, who laid the groundwork and trained alongside their students: architect Paul Bortnowski,³⁵ who taught in the Stage Design program at the National Arts University, while being officially employed by the National Theater in Bucharest, and the first head of the newly established Department of Design, 1969-1974; painters Ion Bitzan,³⁶ a remarkable, dedicated professor, head of the Department from 1977 to 1990, and later Dean of the Faculty of Decorative Arts and Design from 1990 to 1997, and Vladimir Şetran³⁷; graphic artist I. Hainoroc Constantinescu.³⁸ Among them, Ion Bitzan stands out as an exceptional figure; he was recently rehabilitated as a representative of the neo-avant-garde, conceptualism, and international minimalism.³⁹ An outstanding Professor, he made an essential contribution to design higher education, teaching and supervising workshop and diploma projects and thus leaving his mark on many generations of graduates.

The creation of the Department of Industrial Forms as part of the Faculty of Decorative Arts in the Ion Andreescu Institute of Fine Arts in Cluj-Napoca in the early 1970s is connected to Virgil Salvanu's (the first head of the Department and a functionalist architect) passion for design.⁴⁰ He ran the workshops, taught Descriptive Geometry and Perspective, Design and Furniture History; he gathered around him a group of professors from the other specialties at the Institute of Fine Arts and the University in Cluj-Napoca.

Similarly designed in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, the original four-year program was modeled after the Bauhaus curriculum.⁴¹ It included courses such as Study of Color, Drawing, Introduction into Design, Design-Visual Communications, Design-Product-Ambiance, Design-Working with Materials (practical), Three-dimensional Structures, Ergonomics, Psychology of Form, Modeling and Model-Making, Materials and Industrial Processes, Aesthetics, Marketing, Art and Design History (special course), etc. Later, they added one year of specialization quite similar to an MA program. The new program placed the study of form, color and drawing at the center of the curriculum, considering them the basis of any serious art education. (Fig. 3, 4)

35 Paul Bortnowski (1922-2007) was an architect (Faculty of Architecture in Bucharest, 1949) who made an essential contribution to design, film set design (starting in 1951), and theatre techniques (starting in 1956). He taught and supervised workshop and diploma design projects; he also set forth a coherent development policy for design as chairman of the Design Committee within the Union of Visual Artists. He also chaired the Romanian Center for Design (1979).

36 Ion Bitzan (1924-1997) was a painter and alumnus of "Nicolae Grigorescu" Institute of Art in Bucharest. He was the recipient of numerous awards and had national and international exhibitions – at the Venice Biennale (1964, 1997) and the Sao Paulo Biennale (1967, 1969, 1981). His works are in public collections (Museum of Modern Art, New York, Kunsthalle, Hamburg, etc.): paintings, collages, installation objects, book objects, etc.

37 Vladimir Şetran (b. 1935, Hotin region) was a painter, an alumnus of the "Nicolae Grigorescu" Institute of Art in Bucharest (1957, the class of Ion Marşic), and a faculty member at the same institution starting with 1964. Numerous awards and national and international exhibitions, author of monumental murals, sculptures and tapestries.

38 Ion Hainoroc Constantinescu (1929–2011), graphic artist. He emigrated to Sweden in 1978 where he taught visual arts for an art school, afterwards took refuge in Southern France, and returned to Sweden, where he died.

39 *Prizonierii avangardei. O retrospectivă Ion Bitzan*, curator Călin Dan (Bucharest: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 23 Nov. 2017 – 01 April 2018).

40 Virgil Salvanu (1924-2017) was an architect who studied at the Polytechnics in Budapest (1942-1944), the Faculty of Architecture in Bucharest (1948). From 1948, he taught at Ioan Andreescu Institute of Fine Arts in Cluj-Napoca.

41 Interview with Alexandru Alămoreanu, 2012.

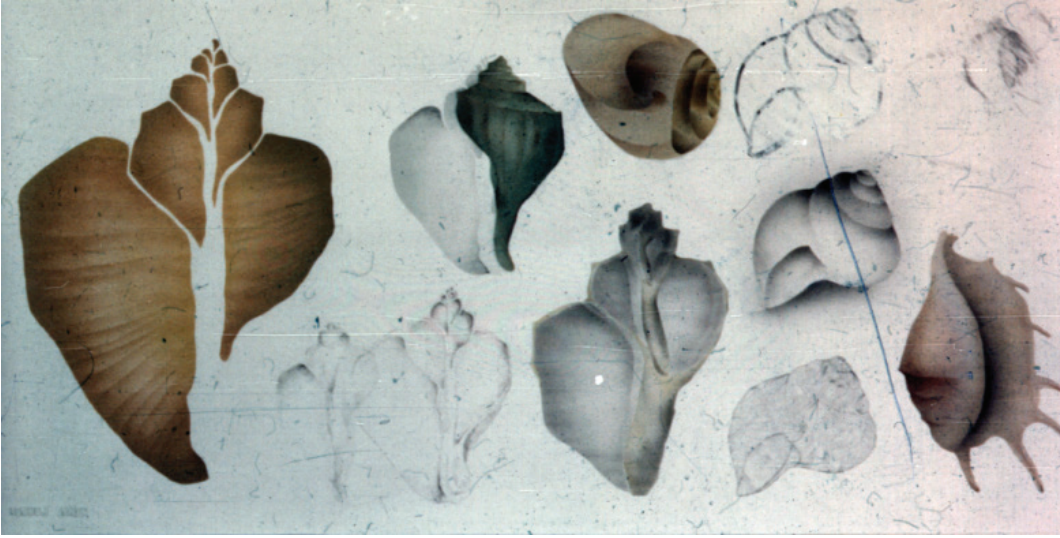


Fig. 3: Toma Lucian, Study of biological forms, shells, ink and tempera technique on paper, first year, sem. II, 1973/1974, class Vladimir Şetran, Industrial Forms / Design Section of the "Nicolae Grigorescu" Institute of Fine Arts, Bucharest

Fig. 4: Cristian Gustescu, Nude study ensemble, third year, 1977/1978. Industrial Forms / Design Section of the "Nicolae Grigorescu" Institute of Fine Arts, Bucharest





Fig. 5: Study for a logo for the Constanța Public Transport Company, author unknown, Industrial Forms / Design Section of the “Nicolae Grigorescu” Institute of Fine Arts, Bucharest

In 1971, Virgil Salvanu received a UNESCO scholarship to study industrial design in the U.S. – this was partly a sign of goodwill from the West prompted by Ceaușescu’s refusal to join the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia – with a focus on the structure and methodology of design education in the U.S. He visited 22 specialized institutions (among them the New Bauhaus School of Chicago) and brought back with him the literature used to design the curriculum based on which the Ministry of Education accredited the Department of Industrial Forms, on the initiative of Iulian Crețu.⁴² However, the Bucharest Design School, founded and ran by Paul Bortnowski, had been operating since 1969, also using resources brought from the U.S. (among them the papers presented at the ICSID/ International Council of Societies of Industrial Design conference in 1964) and the UK.⁴³ We find therefore that the Cluj-Napoca Department of Industrial Forms (1971) lagged slightly behind the one in Bucharest (1969), while both drew inspiration from the American model (possibly in the context of the Thaw that included Romania too), although accessed through different channels by the two founders of the departments: Paul Bortnowski and Virgil Salvanu.

Marcel Puțoreanu (Klamer), who started studying design in 1976 after he graduated from STACO (Technical School of Architecture and the Building of Cities),⁴⁴ where theory was taught strictly according to the Bauhaus principles, believes that the practical activities at the Department of Design (using the same Bauhaus model – scale models, prototypes, tests, trials, experiments, etc.) emphasized the play with forms at the expense of function.⁴⁵ (Fig. 5)

42 Mihnea-Dulfu George-Ciprian, „Designul românesc în căutarea identității”, PhD Diss., Art and Design University of Cluj-Napoca, 2014 (Anexa 2 – Intervi cu Virgil Salvanu).

43 Paul Bortnowski participated in the International Design Conference Aspen, Colorado, in 1974. Correspondence with Vlad Bortnowski, September 2019.

44 In 1955, under the 1948 School Reform, *Școala Tehnică de Arhitectură și Construcția Orașelor* (STACO) was created as a post-secondary education institution where teachers and students who were not allowed to teach or study at the Faculty of Architecture for political reasons would take refuge. Ana Maria Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist. România 1944-1989* (Bucharest: Simetria, 2011), 29-30.

45 Correspondence with Marcel Puțoreanu (Klamer), 2013.



Fig. 6: Constantin Grigoruță. Design study for the Computer Peripheral Equipment State Factory in Bucharest (IEPER) coord. by Ion Bitzan, Industrial Forms/ Design Section of the "Nicolae Grigorescu" Institute of Fine Arts, 1975

The extent to which the structure of design education in Bucharest adhered to the Bauhaus philosophy, we learn from professor Bitzan's presentation at the 1979 *Design-cultură-civilizație, definire, strategie, impact social* colloquium in Bucharest. The content of the curriculum was to focus on three interdependent and correlated components: the artistic component, meaning working with specific elements to design the form of the product; the practical component, aimed at familiarizing the student with different materials and technologies; and the theoretical component, focused on the understanding of problems and the use of abstract notions to find the best solutions in the problem-solving process.⁴⁶ (Fig. 6)

The news of the four-year program, the three specializations and the first Romanian design school projects of the Bucharest school reached Eastern Europe through the East-German magazine *form+zweck. Fachzeitschrift für industrielle Formgestaltung (Form and Purpose. A Journal of Industrial Design)* founded by the Institute of Industrial Design in East Berlin and published regularly from 1964 to 1989. The 1976 issue of the magazine included a presentation by Paul Constantin, Professor and architect, of Bucharest's Department of Industrial Forms and school projects.⁴⁷

The professors' teaching activity included translating excerpts and discussing design concepts, methods and ethics and responsibility issues raised by niche Western theoreticians and practitioners – Victor Papanek⁴⁸ (currently considered an activist designer, one of the

46 Ion Bitzan, "Design-cultură-civilizație, definire, strategie, impact social" colloquium, *Arta* 11-12 (1979): 32.

47 Paul Constantin, "Lehrplan in Experiment (Ausbildung S.R. Rumänien)," *form+zweck* 5 (1976): 46-47.

48 In 1971 Victor Papanek (1927-1999), an Austrian-born American professor and designer, published his key work *Design for the Real World. Human Ecology and Social Change*. In it, he emphasized the urgency of issues related to environment, consumption, waste management and pollution, as well as the design for people with disabilities. See Victor Papanek, "O alternativă," presentation paper by N. Constantinescu based on Papanek's article, "An Alternative to Sterility," *Mobilă* 182 (1970): 30-40, held at the library of the Romanian Union of Plastic Artists, *Estetica Industrială (Design)* 1-2 (1972): 107-111.

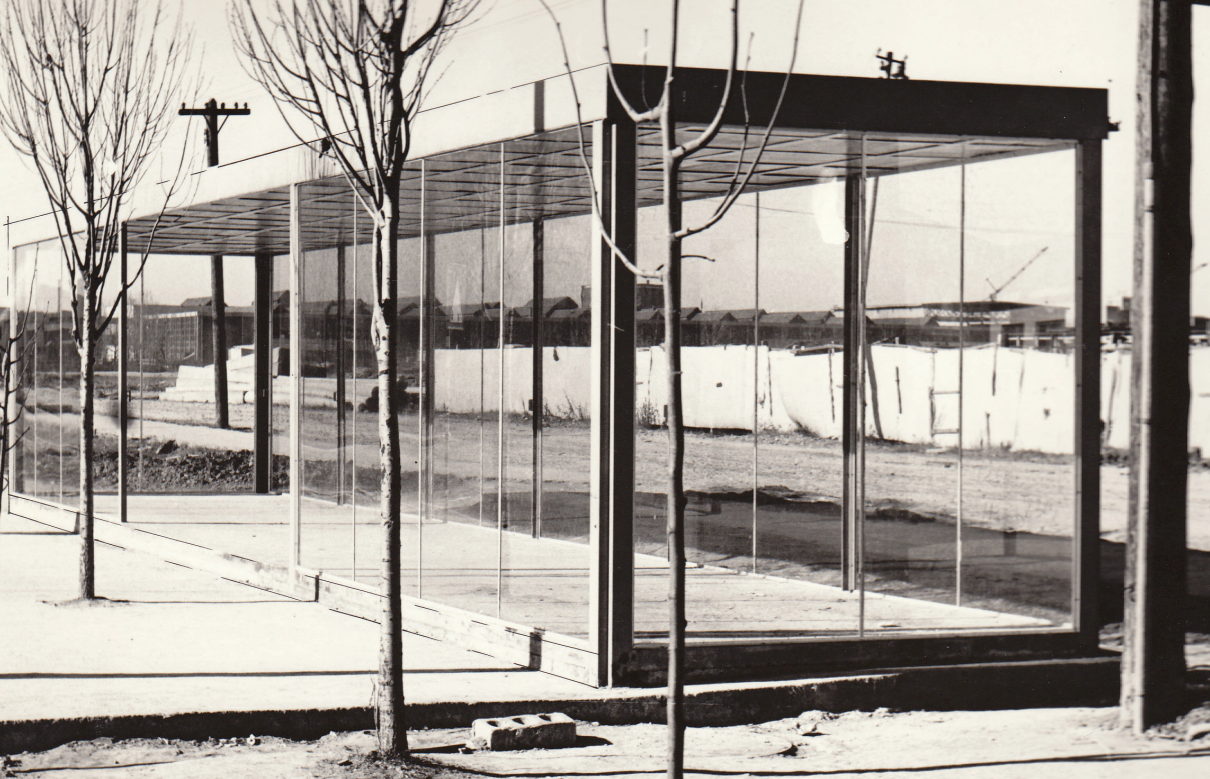


Fig. 7: Decebal Scriba. (above) Urban furniture prototype (bus shelter) (1974-1975), Buzău Glass Factory; (below) Urban furniture program, BA project, sketch (coord. by arch. Paul Bortnowski, Industrial Forms Section of the "Nicolae Grigorescu" Institute of Fine Arts, Bucharest, 1973)

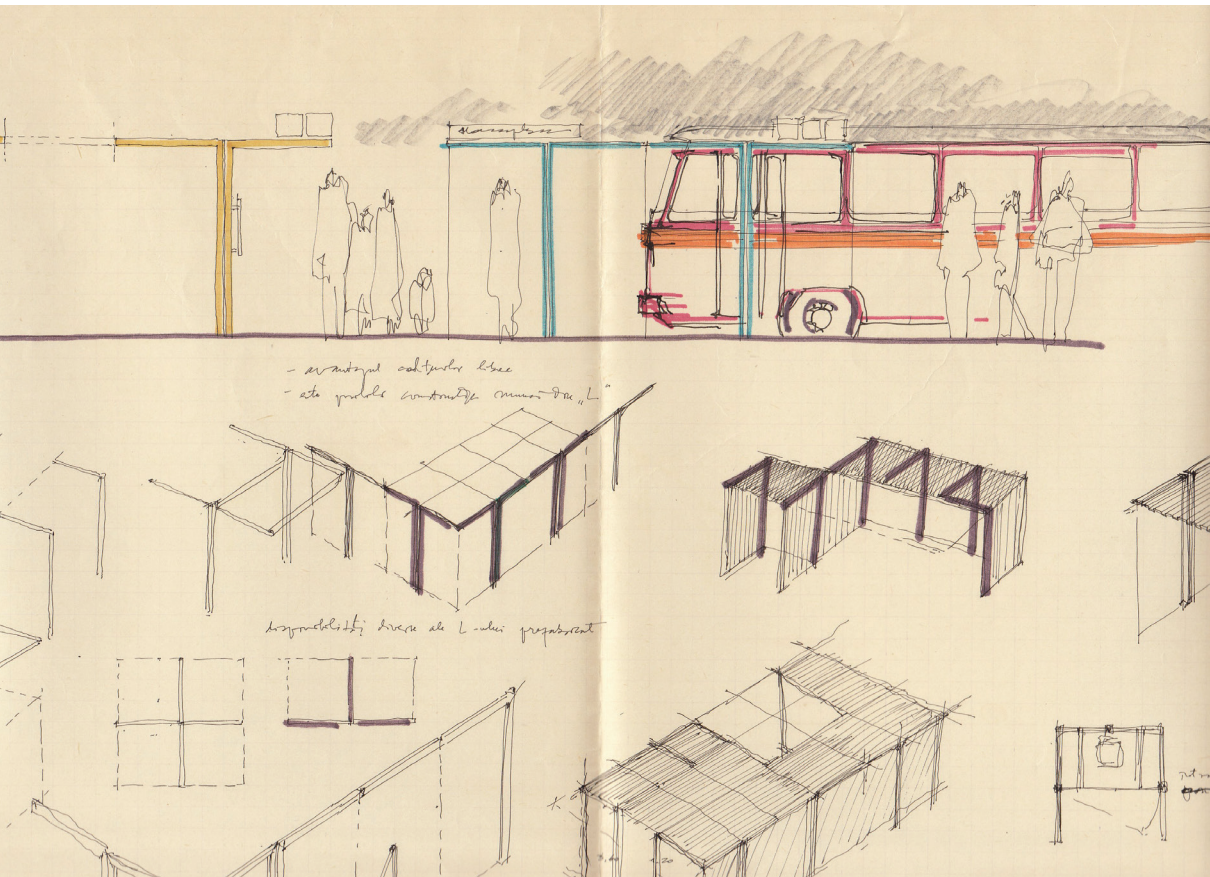




Fig. 8: Decebal Scriba. Faience tableware, ceramic prototypes produced by the Aesthetics Center for Light Industry, 1978, Bucharest

Fig. 9: Marina Theodorescu Rusu. Porcelain dose set



most influential pioneers of ecological and social design).⁴⁹ They would also use Romanian translations of the latest works in modern design theory at that time as teaching materials — e.g., Christopher Jones, *Design. Metode și aplicații* [*Design Methods. Seeds of Human Futures*] (Editura Tehnică, Bucharest, 1975).⁵⁰

The professors made efforts to keep up with Western developments in the field of design and to ensure that the designers were well integrated in production, given the limitations imposed by the socialist ideological context. The utility and quality (with access to up-to-date information to the extent possible) of design education in Bucharest are perceived differently depending on where the designer has practiced.

Alexandru Manu, who left Romania in 1978, right after graduating, believes that it was precisely the lack of information and a real connection to the market, the producer and the end users, as well as his lack of internalization of the social role of design that made him a competitive and successful designer in the West.⁵¹ Decebal Scriba, also in the first class to graduate, believes however that the professors were connected to the international design scene and successfully conveyed some of the spirit of Modernism to their students:

“If we agree that both the Bauhaus experiments and the American design school, in the spirit of which we were trained for the most part, integrated the idea/concept of Modernism, then we can safely say that we were – at least the first cohorts graduating from the Department of Design – shaped, among others, by Modernism.”⁵² (Fig. 7, 8, 9)

Craft +/- Design

Another issue that further complicated the status of Romanian design and designers was the lack of continuity with the tradition of the Arts and Crafts schools. There was no pre-socialist design tradition that the Romanian socialist design school could claim or reject, or which could serve as its foundation.⁵³ Discursively, this break with the Arts and Crafts School tradition is evocative, and this is no exaggeration, of Nicolaus Pevsner’s claim that the Arts and Crafts movement played a rather transitory role, not at all decisive, in the shaping of modern design linked instead to industrial progress and mass production.

In the early days of the school and later, there was no talk of this lack of tradition, perhaps also to avoid to further complicate the context in which design was taught and practiced. According to Decebal Scriba, “this was due to a simplistic approach to the designer profession, even if the association with the Arts and Crafts School tradition was not without merits.”⁵⁴

In a discussion of the relationship between modern design and peasant household items (understood as “folk design”), Paul Bortnowski admitted that design was late to emerge in

49 Mateo Kries, Amelie Klein, Alison J. Clarke, eds., *Victor Papanek: The Politics of Design*, Vitra Design Museum, 2018 (exhibition catalogue, Vitra Design Museum, Sep 29, 2018 - Mar 10 2019).

50 Christopher Jones, *Design. Metode și aplicații*, translation from the English by eng. Margareta Dan and arch. Virgil Salvanu after the 1970 edition (Bucharest: Editura Tehnică, 1975).

51 Correspondence with Alexandru Manu, 2012.

52 Correspondence with Decebal Scriba, 2012.

53 Iulian Crețu and Virgil Salvanu did try to substantiate the continuity between the design schools and the arts and crafts schools via the Brâncuși mythology, and consequently to claim some sort of precedence: “Some Romanian Arts and Crafts schools were among the first in Europe to train specialists using scientific and systematic methods and to promote the basic elements of the relationship between art and industry, between the beautiful and the useful. The great precursor of modern sculpture, Constantin Brâncuși enriched the world art heritage with the forms unique to the Romanian people. He was trained at a Romanian Arts and Crafts School at the turn of the nineteenth century and became the designer [sic!] who created the first aerodynamic shapes in the form of his ‘Măiastras’.” Iulian Crețu and Virgil Salvanu, “Designul în ambianța estetică a României contemporane,” *Estetica industrială* 1 (1974): 49-50.

54 Correspondence with Decebal Scriba, 2012.

Romania due to the country's industry lagging behind during the interwar years, and the "after-effects" of the lag, as well as to a certain reluctance to change from the art schools, which were very much focused on the academic model and had but a weak contact with the Bauhaus.

Further, "our urban professions lacked the well-developed structure and the long tradition of our rural crafts" unlike the Scandinavian countries where, for instance, the (rural) crafts organized into guilds complemented the (urban) industrial activities.⁵⁵ Romania experienced "discontinuity between craft-based and industrial design."⁵⁶ This, along with the need to avoid any ideological faux pas, might explain why the relationship between rural craftsmanship (tools, household items, furniture) and modern design (with its integrated conception and focus on industrial production) was set aside.

Notes on Designers in the Socialist Industry

After graduating, the designers' status was at best uncertain. Although they received general training in design, they were "integrated" via centrally assigned jobs in various industrial facilities all over the country, where they faced specific challenges, some of the designers having to specialize in several industries in time. The profession of designer was not included in the official nomenclature of professions in socialist Romania.

The wish to design and manufacture new products – at first under a license, as it was the case of the Dacia 1100 and the Dacia 1300, both car models produced in the late 1960s-1970s under an official Renault license and with French expertise – turned into a full-blown obsession with independently manufacturing a reduced engine capacity, small-size, dynamically shaped Romanian car that would be an affordable and reliable solution for Romanian urban residents. The designers carried out their task as professionally as they could, given the decision-making system and technological limitations. They participated in the attempts to design and manufacture Romanian objects as commissioned by the Communist Party, e.g., the Dacia 500, *Lăstun* model, designed as a "people's car" with a very small engine capacity. A very expensive project carried out by a complex team of specialists, the *Lăstun* was ultimately a failed project because of the lack of materials and technology—although the car was forcefully patented in 1986. Radu Teodorescu was in charge of designing the body of the *Lăstun*, while Adrian Marin designed the interior according to ergonomic and functional principles.⁵⁷ (Fig. 10)

In theory, the *Lăstun* had a minimalist shape, like other similar car models designed in the 1980s; it was fuel-efficient, lightweight, reasonably priced, and easy to handle. In practice, the manufacturer and the users were faced with high costs and technology that used low-quality materials, sometimes "makeshift" technology, resulting in adulterations that went as far as the shape and the chromatic range designed by Radu Teodorescu.⁵⁸ This manufacturing debacle showed that the Romanian industry needed retrofitting, while at the same time it put an end to the design process.

The regime's ambition to manufacture "original Romanian products" was in fact meant as a display of the utopian power and the autonomy of the socioeconomic system of the Romanian Socialist Republic (including the manufacture of a "car for everybody") rather than to employ design consistently as a resource suited to a strategy for the masses.

55 Paul Bortnowski și Catinca Ralea. "Un sistem creator de stări de creativitate," *Arta* 11-12 (1979): 40.

56 Ibid.

57 After graduating from the Bucharest School of Design in 1979, Radu Teodorescu was assigned a job at the ICTCM (Institute of Scientific and Technological Research for the Machine-Building Industry) and later at the INMT (National Institute for Thermal Engines, Bucharest). Adrian Marin graduated from the Cluj-Napoca School of Design in 1979.

58 Interview with Radu Teodorescu, 2013. He acknowledges the "shortcomings" of the *Lăstun*, putting them down to youthful enthusiasm and lack of experience.



Fig. 10: Radu Teodorescu. Dacia 500 *Lăstun*: (above) first model and (below) prototype (1983)

Concluding Remarks

There is a two-fold complexity at work in the manifestations of design in Romania, as seen through the lens of Modernism. First, in pre- and interwar Romania, one finds a subtle connection between a long-term modernization process, as experienced throughout the Romanian society, whose aim was the synchronization with Europe and the achievement of modernity (the nation-state, industrialization, legal and social reform, etc.), and the spread of the notion of design through experiments and exemplary endeavors, albeit few and far between. From this perspective, the process of integration into modernity under the influence of the West also included manifestations that pertained to the democratization of access to everyday products.

Secondly, in postwar Romania, under the new communist rule, the emergence of design higher education (in 1969 in Bucharest and 1971 in Cluj-Napoca) and professional designers fitted the official vision of the socialist state – according to which design would lend legitimacy to industry and industrialization. In parallel, the vision of the founding fathers of the Romanian design school (architects and painters most likely connected to a modernist education) mirrored the international concerns with how modern design was to be taught (the Romanian syllabus was inspired by the Bauhaus pedagogical model). Romanian designers attempted to connect with the international reality, constantly raising the issue of synchronization in economic development in their official discourse, while, unofficially, they spoke about how design cannot compensate for the poverty of material resources and technological deficiencies of a ruined economic system.

In the context of non-competition, artificial demand and inadequate supply, the natural design system that exists within a free market – designer – producer – user – was short-circuited. This is why following the 1989 events Romanian designers (assuming social and civic responsibility) experienced moments of confidence and effervescence, trying to promote design as a resource in economic and social development.

To conclude, Romanian design was born “modern” in a totalitarian state, supported by a weak economy and a backward industry dominated by heavy industry (which aspired to be on the same level with other states, be they socialist or capitalist), and dedicated only in theory to the people. In other words, the opposite of the European and North American concept of modern design, which came into existence at the same time as real industrial progress, mass production, and the idea that everyday products should be accessible to as large a number of people as possible.

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- Fig. 9: Archive of the Union of Plastic Artists, Design section, 1986.
- Fig. 10: Radu Teodorescu's archive, Archive of the Union of Plastic Artists, Design section, 1986.