The influence of the political and economic situation in socialist Czechoslovakia, from the 1950s to 1970s, on practice of designers and expression of individual taste through design

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Introduction

This dissertation will explore how the political regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s to 1970s influenced the interior and industrial design within domestic spaces. By analysing the work of Czechoslovak furniture designer František Jirák, it will outline the essential qualities of the interior of the home and examine the links between the selected period's design and the totalitarian political regime. Furthermore, it will explore multiple underlying issues, including the complicated social and economic situation reflected in the relationship between consumers and design. Finally, this dissertation will discuss the issue of expression of individual style and identity through design with supporting statements from the interviews carried out as the primary research.

During my studies of interior design, I have developed a strong awareness of how the spaces we create for ourselves and our homes can reflect our individuality and serve as a form of unique expression of ourselves. In Sparke's words: 'Interior decoration was also linked to personal memory and identity.' (Sparke, 2008, p. 92). Coming from Slovakia, a country that has experienced a totalitarian regime, I was curious about how the political regime affected the field of design within the country. Totalitarian regime meant severe restrictions of personal freedoms (Štoll, 2019) and I have heard many stories of the difficult times experienced by those living there at the time. I have never been too fond of the design I have found in my grandmother's house. I considered it unappealing and identical to the furniture in all her neighbour's houses. That is why my dissertation will explore whether the lack of variety of the interior equipment and furniture available, was a result of

the totalitarian political regime and whether it restricted the ordinary people to express their taste and personal style through interior design. Furthermore, the objective of this dissertation is to raise the issue of the influence of political regimes on design and suggest that the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s to 1970s did have serious effects on interior design and the creative freedom of designers. As a part of my primary research, I carried out interviews with people, of different generations, who have personally experienced the socialist regime and I have investigated its effect on their everyday lives. The interviewees wished to remain anonymous. Furthermore, I have engaged with various secondary sources including works written in my native language, by authors Mazalanová (2018), Kolesár (2018) or Hubatová-Vacková (2018) but also sources written in English by authors Crowley (2008) or Sparke (2008).

The first chapter will identify the political and socio-economic situation in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s to 1970s. It will start by introducing the key historical and political events in the world in the 20th century after the Second World War and highlight the circumstances that led to establishing the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Moreover, it will give an overview of further historical development in the selected time period. The chapter will examine how the socialist regime affected the socio-economic situation in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s to 1970s and the everyday life of ordinary people. The investigation will be supported by arguments from interviews, with people of various generations living in Czechoslovakia at that time, which I conducted as part of my primary research, and works of authors Štoll (2019) and Crowley (2008). Moreover, it will examine the consequences of the socio-economic situation on the designers' practice and their complicated working conditions and limited creative opportunities caused by the command

economy in Czechoslovakia. Finally, the chapter will address Expo 58 in Brussels, one of the critical events in the history of Czechoslovak Design, and outline how it shaped design in the following years.

The second chapter of this dissertation will contain an analysis of the Czechoslovak socialist design, the products designed and made in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s to 1970s, with a specific focus on design produced in Slovakia. The chapter will begin with discerning the similarities of modernist thinking and the socialist ideology and how the respective ideologies were translated and implemented into designers' work. The chapter will examine and identify the critical design approaches and characteristics of the Czechoslovak socialist design. Moreover, it will offer examples of domestic interiors and analyse the key traits of the interior of the home. By examining the work of furniture designer František Jirák, it will outline the essential qualities of the design produced in the 1950s to 1970s in terms of form, aesthetic, and use of new techniques and materials. According to Mazalanová (2018), Jirák's works can serve as the most accurate representation of the socialist design style and concepts. The chapter will finish with arguments of authors Hubatová- Vacková (2018) and Crowley (2008), which will illustrate the reality of living spaces in socialist Czechoslovakia.

The final chapter will outline the significance of interior design as an expressive medium by referencing the work of Sparke (2008). It will focus on the personal experiences of people living in Czechoslovakia during the socialist regime and their perception of the furniture and interior design and how the previously addressed design situation affected their domestic interior spaces. Working with information found out in the interviews, it will illustrate if and how the political and socio-economic situation in Czechoslovakia limited freedom of choice. As my final argument, I will offer a contemporary view on the socialistic

design and newly developed efforts of raising awareness of its significance in the history of Czechoslovak Design. It will also give an example of current trend of rediscovering its qualities and using nostalgia in modern advertising. It will also reference opinions of contemporary designers on the design of this era.

This dissertation's conclusion evaluates the research gathered and suggests the political regime severely affected all aspects of life, including design for people in Czechoslovakia but especially designers. It will discuss how is the socialistic design perceived retrospectively affected by feelings of nostalgia.

Chapter 1

Life and Design in Czechoslovakia

To understand the situation in design in the 1950s to 1970s in Czechoslovakia, it is essential to examine the political situation and corresponding socio-economic circumstances at the given time in Czechoslovakia. The chapter will offer a historical overview and illustrate the realities of life in a totalitarian regime and designers' situation.

The political situation in Czechoslovakia from the 1950s

The division of spheres of interests between the end of World War II in 1945 and the beginning of the Cold War in 1947, was the most significant aspect in shaping the future of Czechoslovakia and the whole Eastern bloc. (Štoll, 2019) The Cold War is characterised by strained relationships of the Eastern countries led by Soviet Union and the Western world countries like Germany, France, Great Britain and USA (Crowley, 2008). Europe was divided into two spheres of interest of the western and eastern powers. The Easter Bloc was completely divided from the West by the 'iron curtain'. It became a territory of the dictatorship of Soviet Union, which was imposed by political and diplomatic pressures (Štoll, 2019). Czechoslovakia became a satellite state of the Soviet Union, as well as other East-European countries, including Poland, Hungary or Bulgaria. Czechoslovakia found itself underhand of the ruling communist party which was more strengthened after a coup in 1948 which started a period of reforms including reforms in education and applying centralised economic system, following the socialist Marxist-Leninist ideology (Štoll, 2019). Socialist economic system refused private ownership and saw the future in the nationalisation of

private businesses. The market, production and prices were controlled and regulated by the government (Ekonómia ľudskou rečou, 2020, 1:06).

However Crowley (2008) observes, that years following after Stalin's death in 1953, who was succeeded by Nikita Khrushchev, one could spot struggles for power of communist parties in Eastern Bloc countries. The so-called 'Thaw' years were marked by loosening of grip of the Soviet Union over the satellite states, including Czechoslovakia, which therefore experienced greater liberalisation (Crowley, 2008). The most significant changes in affairs occurred in the 1960s, the period which is now known as the Prague Spring. It was characterised by social and cultural reforms. The term 'socialism with a human face' was brought by more liberal minister Alexander Dubček (Suk, 2018). However, efforts for change and improvements in the lives of Czechoslovak people did not meet with an understanding of the leaders of the Soviet Union. All liberalisation was strictly and violently pushed by military invasion in the summer of 1968 (Suk, 2018). After regaining full control over Czechoslovakia, the newly elected and strictly controlled communist government began the process called "normalisation" which was a forceful and repressive return to the state of the country from the after-war period Štoll, 2019). As Štoll (2019) suggests: 'It was a time of disillusion, apathy, desperation and lost hope for many citizens.' (Štoll, 2019,p.9). Members of the liberal cultural and political movements and intellectuals were silenced or emigrated, like many ordinary people who fled the country. There were numerous occasions when people were forced to join the communist party, to secure a safe life for their family or accepted it as necessary evil to live an average life (Štoll, 2019).

Figure 1. Photograph documenting occupation of Czechoslovakia (Ladislav Bielik, 1968)

The socialist lifestyle

Socialism proved to be significantly flawed and failed at providing a sufficient quality of life for the citizens. The consequences of centralised government-controlled economy were often shortages of essential goods such as food or toiletries resulting in people queuing in front of shops for hours (Ekonómia ľudskou rečou, 2020, 3:45).

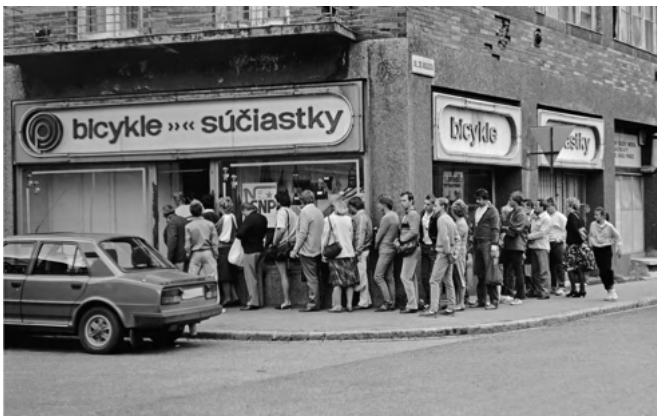

Figure 2. People queuing of front of bicycle shop
(Anton Podstránský, 2018)

Figure 3. Inside the shop in Czechoslovakia
(Interez, 2019)

The division from the West, resulted in the government's propaganda for competition with the western countries, in strive to "catch up and be ahead", something that the communist regime could never achieve compared to developed western capitalism (Štoll, 2019). According to observations of Štoll:

'The slogan became especially absurd in the last two decades of the regimes as it was already clear that these standards of living had become incomparable. Until the mid-1960s, most Czechoslovak citizens could not travel, not even to the other socialist countries. However, in the years leading up to the Soviet occupation in 1968, many people had a chance to go to the West and experience it for themselves. ' (Štoll, 2019, p. 11)

Ordinary people could not ignore the difference in the quality of life in the West. In the following years of the 1960s, also called normalisation, Štoll (2019) observes a rise of materialistic tendencies in people's lifestyles. People focused on acquiring scarce goods and developing consumer habits like the Western ones. According to Crowley and Reid (2000), the resistance to the socialist regime was represented by the consuming lifestyle through which people build their social identities. Crowley and Reid state 'To acquire objects became a way of constituting your selfhood against a regime you despised.' (2000, p.14). The government recognised society's consumer desires and established specialised stores with scarce, luxurious goods called Tuzex to satisfy the need for a taste of the Western world (Schniereová, 2017). Tuzex stores offered foreign goods, mostly products from the West, or goods of home production meant for export. The offered products were considered ordinary in the West but exclusive and of superior quality in socialist Czechoslovakia. In the words of Schniereová '…you could also buy a car there; it was costly, but you could get

brands like Ford or Renault. Those brands gave the owner a higher social status. They were exclusive. Shopping in Tuzex stores was a matter of prestige.' (2017).

Figure 4. Department of food in Tuzex shop in Banská Bystrica, Czechoslovakia in 1964 (TASR, 2017)

It was the only way you could get hold of jeans and trendy clothes, electronics, food of higher quality, or coffee in attractive packaging from various brands. The selection of goods in ordinary shops was modest, limited to essential products, all of home production or imported from other socialist countries. Simply, there was not a lot to choose from (Schniereová, 2017). The goods in Tuzex were expensive and customers had to get hold of a special currency called 'bony' which they could acquire by exchanging dollars they received from relatives abroad or inherited. Many Czechoslovak citizens emigrated to the USA in the 1930s to find better work opportunities. However, many could not return home after the regime change, so they sent the earned money home to their families. (Schniereová, 2017)

Interviewee 2, a male in his 50s, shares his experience: '…people went crazy after the Tuzex store foreign goods like jeans or cars. That is where I got my first real calculator from brand Sharp, I still have it stored somewhere. In other shops, everything was the same. There was just one or two versions of something…[Tuzex] was a way for state to get money back to them. You could not exchange dollars you had, or example from a relative in America, into Czechoslovak crowns, you could change it to bony and then spend them in Tuzex…' (See Appendix B)

The situation of designers

After the coup in 1948, the government undertook nationalisation of businesses and enterprises, creating national enterprises focused on heavy industry (Štoll, 2019). However, there were several enterprises focused on furniture production and Crowley (2000) argues Czechoslovakia was even the leading exporter of mass-produced furniture to the countries of Eastern Bloc. In the words of Guistino: 'Communist Party leaders wanted domestic stability and saw improving the living standard as a tactic for insuring popular support… Well-designed furniture, textiles, glass, ceramics, and other consumer goods could generate state income useful for raising the living standard at home…' (2012, p. 185). Likewise, Crowley comments: ' High living standards were now set at the heart of the vision of the communist future. Progress was increasingly measured in material terms. ' (2000, p. 133). But Mazalanová (2018) argues that despite the government's efforts for control and improvement of design, the regime and the command economy of strictly national businesses resulted in a lack of competitiveness among enterprises and the pressure for high aesthetic or design quality of the products was non-existent.

Application of propositions and ideas into mass production was nearly impossible for designers, due to conservative requirements of the government and the fact that the choice of furniture produced in the national enterprises was passed on to external bodies and centralised furniture designers who worked on orders directly given by the state (Mazalanová, 2018). The common belief was that only a few designers were needed for designing furniture. Thus other independent designers were more often only appreciated and stimulated with exhibitions or in magazine articles, as Mazalanová (2018) concludes. The position and social status of designers was frustrating, as Kolesár (2018) argues, fine art and artists had dramatically more significant position and held more substantial value and social status than works of industrial designers, not to mention that a profession of an interior designer was virtually non-existent. What added to these circumstances, was the absence of relevant higher education course that would focus on product design, industrial design, or interior design (Kolesár, 2018).

The most significant moment in the development of the Czechoslovak socialistic design was the World Design Exhibition, also called EXPO (Giustino, 2012), held in Brussels in 1958 Czechoslovak pavilion achieved great success, received numerous awards, and gained international acknowledgement. The pavillion was designed by Zdeněk Pokorný, František Cubr and Josef Hrubý (Pišťanek, 2009). As Pišťanek (2009) further observes, works showed at the Brussels Expo in 1958 were called ‘the Brussel style’ The term characterised the look of furniture and product design produced after the Brussels Expo in the 1960s in Czechoslovakia (Pišťanek, 2009). The unprecedented success of Czechoslovak Design in Brussels helped form a distinct style of the socialistic design, proving its modern qualities and keeping up with the western trends despite the government's efforts to shape the work

of designers to serve the propaganda (Pišťanek, 2009). Other than international applause, the Expo in Brussels resulted in new motivation and inspiration for designers. The works presented in the pavilion became the blueprint for the design style and aesthetic for designers working in Czechoslovakia, and the 1960s and 70s became the most creative years for Czechoslovak design (Giustino, 2012).

Figure 5. Entrance of Czeckoslovak Pavilion at EXPO 58 (archiweb.cz)

Figure 6. Interior of Czeckoslovak Pavilion at EXPO 58 (bydleni.cz, 2008)

Figure 7. Restaurant of Czeckoslovak Pavilion at EXPO 58 (protisedi.cz, 2018)

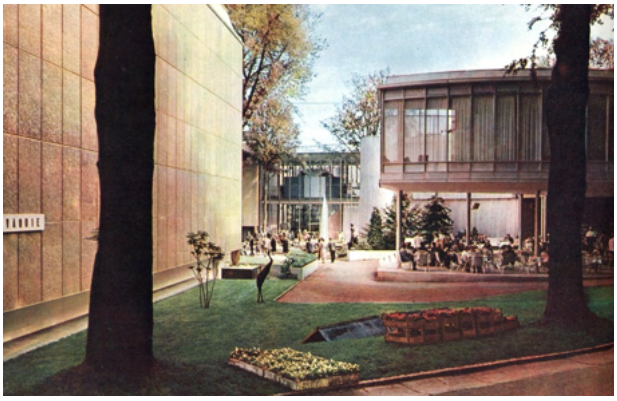

Figure 8. View of the Pavillion (archiweb.cz)

On the other hand, Mazalanová (2018) argues that very few of the national enterprises succeeded in maintaining desired aesthetic and quality, works of greater design potential and value were often produced in enterprises only for export to other countries. According

to Kolesár (2018), many remarkable design solutions ended up only as prototypes and very few were chosen for mass production for domestic market.

The final years of the 1950s brought a significant change in the political as well as social conditions. The weakening of the regime opened opportunities for a different, more consumerism-oriented lifestyle, thus accumulating pressure on the consumer-focused industry to focus on product and industrial Design (Kolesár, 2018). The 1950s also observed government-led efforts for better design, by forming creative committees in 1958, possibly due to the great success of the EXPO in Brussels (Mazalanová, 2018). They included designers, artists, and creatives and production representatives; however, their competencies were limited and unsubstantial. The political influences, restrictions, and conservative dictations on design were undeniable, and Mazalanová concludes: 'Design became a platonic profession.' (2018, p. 199).

Chapter 2

Socialism and Modernism

So far, this dissertation has addressed the key historical circumstances occurring in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s to 1970s, and it has outlined the consumer's lifestyle and the complicated working conditions of designers. This chapter will follow with an analysis of the fundamental characteristics, form, and aesthetic of design produced in Czechoslovakia in the selected timeframe. The chapter will describe and analyse works of František Jirák, as a representation of design style and approach.

The ideologies

Over the course of the 20th century, the weight has shifted from high profile designers' work and the significant amount of decoration to more functional, uniformed design where customers and users' needs were emphasised (Woodham, 1997). The elaborate and decorative nature of designed objects of the 19th century was not desirable anymore. Ideas of modernism already began to culminate in creative scenes as a solution to the First World War's traumatising aftermath, with a desire to change the world in all terms – social, political, material, and visual. As Wilk (2006) suggests, modernism principles were often combined with social and political beliefs of left-wing orientation. We can point out the similarities between the modernist thinking, which can be characterised as the desire to make the world a better place, by the rejection of history and tradition and decorative elements in design and moving towards the introduction of the new, the use of machines, clean and straightforward functional design (Wilk, 2006). Similarly, socialist ideology is refusing old, out-dated bourgeoise class systems striving for equality and demolition of class

differences that socialists believed were caused by private ownerships. Both potentially utopistic ideas striving for perfection share multiple similar qualities, desire for new and higher living (Crowley, 2008). The designers working Czechoslovakia from the 1950s were influenced by both, the modernist thinking and the socialist ideology (Mazalanová, 2018).

The characteristics of socialist design

Socialist official bodies in Czechoslovakia put efforts into encouraging designers and artists to collectively produce art and design for masses and mass production. The propaganda, such as posters and advertising, was supposed to create and promote new lifestyle of a 'cultured socialist person' that could be achieved by being surrounded by beautiful objects of high quality and aesthetically pleasing industrial design (Bungerová, 2018). Thus design was directly correlating with socialist values and became a tool in the political strategies.

Hubatová- Vacková (2018) suggests that one of the key defining factors of socialistic Design in Czechoslovakia was to find the solution to the housing crisis that occurred after the Second World War. The answer was found in the mass construction of new panel blocks of flats. According to Crowley (2008), they were constructed in the style of modernist architecture, using prefabricated panels that could be manufactured off-site. These panel blocks of flats, called 'panelák' formed whole housing estates. The peak of the building of the housing estates can be observed in the late 1960s and 1970s. What could be found inside were standardised flat units with at first two rooms which later grew into three rooms, to offer higher living standards. The design of these standardised units expected the changes of circumstances of the inhabitants, such as the growing of the family and raising children, considering that moving somewhere else was very unlikely. Thus, the spaces had to

be dynamic and provide for every need and life occasion for one family's next 30 or more years of life (Hubatová-Vacková, 2018).

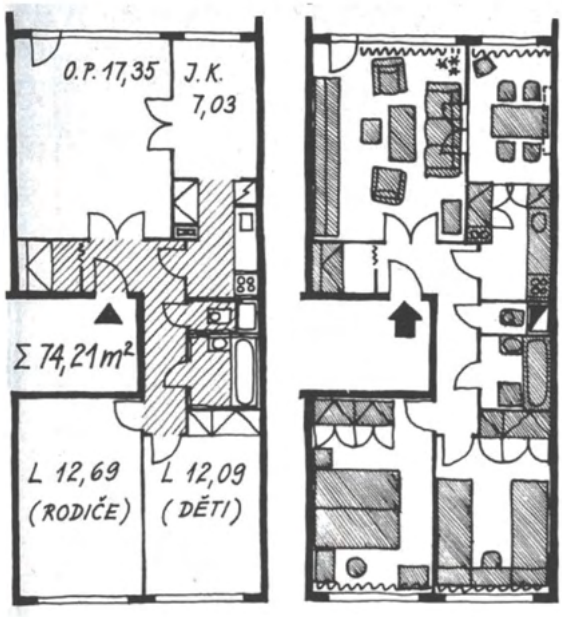

Figure 9. Floorplan of standardised flat unit in 1970s
(Hubatová- Vacková, 2018, p.110)

The interior features and furniture had to fulfill similar requirements and needs of the working-class people. It strived to raise the aesthetic standards with a focus on simplicity, functionality, and emphasise the details of the everyday living spaces. Crowley states:

'Prefabrication was increasingly applied not only to constructional elements of the building, but also parts of the interior. Narrow design specifications were drawn up for windows, standard kitchen and bathroom fittings to be used in all new homes. Such apartments were to be filled with similarly standardised furnishings. Furniture designers were set the task of conceiving modular furniture systems, stripped of the mouldings and historicist embellishments.' (2008, p. 134)

This statement proves, socialist designers were working with the principles of modernism. What is more, these guidelines served well combined with the ideology of equality and

erasing of class differences (Crowley, 2008). Standardisation meant that the same products reached all households.

Designers were encouraged to strive for ‘people's design’ which comprises traits such as affordability, standard quality, low maintenance, and simple, straightforward design and modern aesthetic (Mazalanová, 2018). The furniture of the 50s and 60s was changeable, multifunctional, and flexible. The mentioned qualities were to facilitate ample variations and multifunctionality of one room (Mazalanová, 2018). Moreover, as mentioned before, the construction of blocks of flats containing standardised flat units had its consequences of a limited number of rooms and smaller living area thus multifunctional and changeable furniture was desirable. Space that was a living room during the day became a bedroom in the night. As Mazalanová (2018) illustrates, the so-called sleeping sofas, a piece of bed- like furniture containing storage unit for duvets and a cabinet facilitated such transformation. The most popular and advanced concept was a modular cabinet ensemble, maximalising variability. Standardised units could be mixed and matched and used in the bedroom or living room, often forming whole cabinet walls, as illustrated below. The design concept was to allow people to customise and create living space according to their wishes (Mazalanová, 2018).

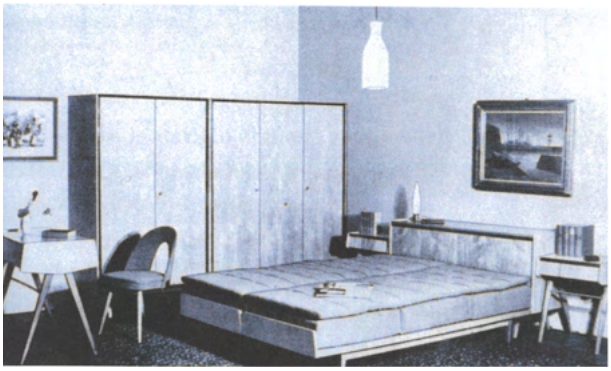

Figure 10. Living room combined with bedroom type LO-03, 1957 (Mazalanová, 2018, p. 217)

Figure 11. Cabinet wall type 550/1, 1974 (Hubatová-Vacková, 2018, p. 311)

Works of František Jirák

In the following paragraph, I will focus on the work of František Jirák, Czechoslovak interior and furniture designer. Mazalanová (2018) states that he was one of the most active and most progressive furniture designers working in Slovakia in the 1950s and '…in this works, we can observe a very representative visual demonstration of the key design concepts of the time period.' (2018 p. 212). Given the unfavourable position of designers and lack of opportunities, Jirák was exceptionally successful with many of his works being chosen for mass production. In the last years of 1960s he became the centralized furniture designer for Spišská Nova Ves National Enterprise (Mazalanová, 2018). Most notable are his furniture pieces such as chairs and armchairs, cabinet ensembles, and bedroom and living room furniture sets. At the beginning of his career in the 1930s, František Jirák worked with softer biomorphic and organic dynamics. Hubatová- Vacková (2018) points out the frequent use of wood as the primary material, focusing on craft execution with subtle Scandinavian design impressions. In his later works, Jirák developed a specific visual character still working with bent and organic forms, with new technologies and materials. A substantial portion of his work was made by bending plywood, its moulding, and using glass laminate finish (Mazalanová, 2018). These principles are a common aspect repeating in his designs. Later he began to combine organic and dynamic diagonal lines and creating shell-like shapes in some of his most successful and famous chair and armchair designs (see Figure 12. and Figure 13.) Small and mobile furniture was a regular part of his works over the years, even though very few were moved to mass production (Mazalanová, 2018).

Figure 12. Chair designed by František Jirák, 1958 (Slovenské centrum dizajnu, 2018)

Figure 13. Armchair designed by František Jirák

Uhrín (2018) argues, that their aesthetic and made quality were excellent and due to the limited production, they were rare and valuable. According to Uhrín 'The production of these armchairs would not be lucrative or profitable from today's point of view, which effectively raises their current value. Considering the complicated production process, use of glass laminate and synthetic resin and manner of upholstery…significant amount of work was handmade.' (2018, p. 230). Uhrín (2018) considers a chair from bent plywood (see Figure 12.) to be Jirák's most original work. The chair was mass-produced in Slovakia in the 1960s and represented the 'Brussel style'. These works were representative of the first decades of furniture design in the after-war period in Czechoslovakia (Mazalanová, 2018). František Jirák has admitted to taking inspiration from works of Charles Eames and Eero

Saarinen as well as contemporary design from West Germany, England, USA and Scandinavian, predominantly Danish design, which later reflected in stricter geometric and orthogonal forms of his works (Mazalanová, 2018). As mentioned before, Jirák's works have moved from softer organic and biomorphic forms to geometric and orthogonal styles with a stable focus on simplicity, functionality, and clean lines. Mazalanová (2018) believes Jirák favoured a limited colour scheme and used a combination of colour on upholstery as his trademark and way of introducing colour accents into the interior space.

As an answer to the brief of the Third National Exhibition of Applied Arts in 1958, which requested a design of furniture equipment of a standardised living room, František Jirák created his version of mountable flexible furniture units called Monti 300. This furniture system was considered the most advanced version of flexible storage space (Mazalanová, 2018). Like many other furniture and product designers in Czechoslovakia, he also found his precedents in modernist ideas and influences. As Mazalanová (2018) observes, the furniture and cabinets working on the principle of units and adaptability were already very popular in the West and the USA, where they were used a decade earlier, for example, the Storage Units by the Eames could serve as a precedent for the cabinet ensembles. Furniture set Monti 300 was designed on the principle of cabinets flexible shelving elements and drawers, that could be demounted and reassembled according to the owner's imagination.

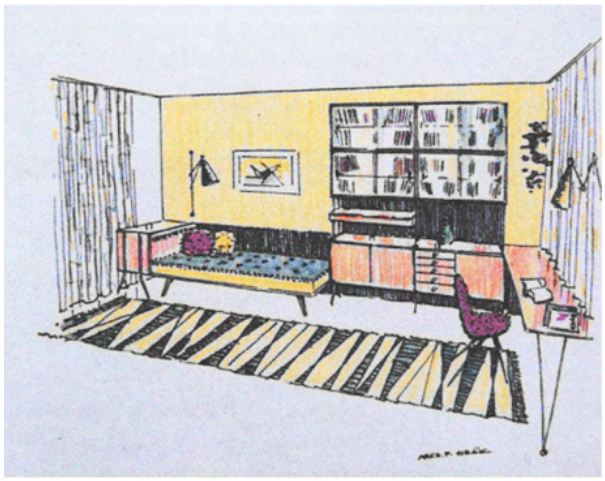

Figure 14. Sketch of student room with Monti 300, 1961 (Mazalanová, 2018, p. 218)

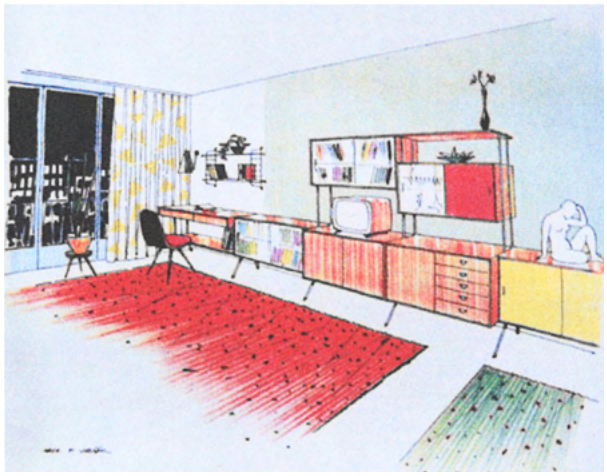

Figure 15. Sketch of living room with Monti 300, 1961 (Mazalanová, 2018, p. 218)

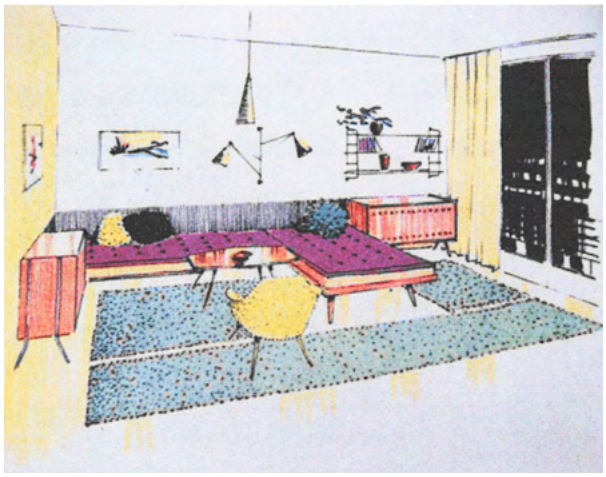

Figure 16. Sketch of living room/ bedroom with Monti 300, 1961 (Mazalanová, 2018, p. 218)

Figure 17. Living room with Monti 300 (PhDr. Dagmar Koudelková)

The static cubic shape of the furniture set was broken up by introducing, at that time very popular, diagonal legs of the cabinet (Mazalanová, 2018). The ensemble of Jirák's living room proposal was picked for industrial mass production. However, Mazalanová (2018) argues that the Monti furniture's fundamental abilities and potential were not respected, and cabinet sets were often sold and presented in fixed arrangements and as a part of the whole ensemble, denying the purpose they were designed for. What is more, as Mazalanová (2018) suggests, the individual pieces designed for the living room unit could only be

purchased as a whole package together with armchairs and a coffee table as a set for the standardised living room M 300 which was also the case for many other furniture equipment. Mazalanová (2018) continues by giving an example of the critique addressing the impossibility to buy furniture separately from period magazine Architekt a nový byt: 'Monti is the pride of our furniture industry, yet you can barely find it in the stores in the form it was intended to be presented in and what is more, you cannot even buy it without having to buy a whole new living room. What nonsense!' (Havlová, p. 46 quoted in Mazalanová).

Figure 18. Standardised room M 300, 1957 (Mazalanová, 2018, p. 218)

Other Jirák's successful furniture sets were ensembles of living room with added function of bedroom models O-46 and O-47 (see Figure 19. and Figure 20.) Designed in 1967 (Mazalanová, 2018), these models were the first to be mass-produced in the style of newly desired requirements of the aesthetic and multifunctional qualities. Both ensembles

have recognisable signature traits of Jirák's combination of organic and dynamic forms, such as rounded corners and diagonal legs of the furniture, lifting it off the ground. Subtle moveable furniture like tables, bedside tables and chairs with similarly diagonal legs give the impression of lighter and more dynamic language contrasting the rigid cubic geometry of the static pieces of furniture like wardrobe and the bed (Mazalanová, 2018).

Figure 19. Mazalanová (2018) Living room model O-46 in 1967
(Mazalanová, 2018, p. 214)

Figure 20. Living room model O-47, 1967
(Mazalanová, 2018, p. 214)

The design versus reality

Mazalanová (2018) observes that the work of Czechoslovak socialistic designers was ambitious and the design well thought through, however Hubatová- Vacková (2018) argues that the original intention for variability and adaptability of designed furniture, was not appropriately exercised and unsuccessful in actual living situations. She supports this argument with a study from 1973 when an analysis was carried out to better understand the striking conflict between the ideal intended design of the interior living spaces and the actual reality of living in the furnished flat units. The study was carried out by visiting hundreds of flats across housing estates in Prague. In conclusion, it suggested that the

interiors were unattractive, dull, and carrying a strong resemblance to one another. The flats were identical in the disposition of the rooms, the only differences could be found in how was the furniture organized in the rooms and the use of decoration and textiles such as rugs and curtains. Likewise, Crowley comments: 'To enter into standard apartment furnished with standard furniture systems in standard colours and finishes was to experience the placelessness for which the Eastern Bloc later became notorious.' (2008, p.134).

Moreover, Hubatová – Vacková (2018) points out that the furniture units were often misused, for example, cabinet wall blocking a doorway effectively obstructing circulation routes and making the rooms appear overcrowded with furniture. However, further research and questionnaire provided exciting information on the emotional experience of the interior by the inhabitants. The first question was to identify the piece of furniture that the occupant has the most positive attitude towards. The most often mentioned were the little decorative objects, followed by the cabinet wall and the seating unit. As Hubatová – Vacková (2018) suggests, cabinet walls belonged among the most loved pieces of furniture, often taking the form of family presentation, serving as a display of precious possessions. Surprisingly, the seating unit was also referred to as the least favourite interior furniture piece due to its most considerable spatial presence and taking up too much space (Hubatová – Vacková, 2018).

Chapter 3

Design and Society

To continue the ideas and analysis from previous chapters, this chapter will address the issue of expression of personal taste and individuality through interior design of home and how that was influenced by the political regime in Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, working with interviewees' statements and using their personal experiences and opinions, it will illustrate the consumer's relationship towards design. The chapter will finish with a contemporary perspective on socialist interior and furniture design.

Design and personal identity

In her work, Sparke (2008) suggests that the use of colors, patterns, decoration, desire for embellishments, and arranging movable objects within the interior has been a part of human nature throughout the history of civilisation. She continues by suggesting that the importance of interior design and decoration was fully recognised in the 19th century when clear links were formed between the decoration of a room and the occupier's personality (Sparke, 2008). In the words of Andrew Jackson Downing (quoted in Sparke): '…permanent dwelling can give the impress of our mind and identify with our existence.' (Sparke, 2008, p.91). Our interior decoration choices can be dictated by the newest trends, influenced by new styles. However, they will always mirror our personal preferences and our choices will be influenced by our emotions and memories. Sparke adds: 'Interior decoration was also linked to personal memory and identity…decoration was an important means of linking people to their environments and of making them feel at home'. ' (2008, p.92).

Previous chapters suggest the Czechoslovak government's shift of attention towards the industrial design and the interior design of the home as it became the key aspect of communist agenda. They wished to strengthen socialist ideology by raising the standard of people's domestic spaces (Crowley 2008). Evidence proves, that the government's involvement in the design of home was somewhat restrictive. Crowley (2000) notes: '…the contemporary style's emphasis on the integrated design of furnishings for the new flats built to standard plans in the late 1950s and early 1960s, left little room for occupants to customise their home in accordance with their individual sense of taste and comfort.' (2000, p. 13). As Crowley (2000) argues, the home became one of the tools of the communist government how to control the lives of people even more.

Furthermore, Crowley (2000) suggests, they presented the new modern furniture as a way to educate them towards good, tasteful 'socialistic' design while in reality, it was a way to control consumer behaviour. Nevertheless, the consequences of command economy system were severe shortages of goods and a limited variety of products. Interviewee 2 states: 'Of course almost everyone wanted to have something a little more special or different than everybody else, but the problem was there was nothing. People were glad that they got what everyone else had because the stock was so insufficient…even those basic things were difficult to get because there just was not enough of them.' (See Appendix B).

According to Buchli '…the Thaw [period] witnessed a revival of a body of disciplining Modernist norms in the domestic space.' (1997, p. 162). This statement could suggest that the lack of persons' individual expression of taste in the home's interior design can be a result of a combination of modernist and socialist ideologies. As Sparke argues, the ideas of

modernist architects and designers '…were driven by a desire to democratise design, standardisation was hugely important.' (2008, p. 147). These ideas served well to the socialist propaganda that was trying to achieve equality in all fields of life. As Crowley states: 'The aesthetic of domestic life became the object of extensive popular advice literature… urging that low, light and simple furniture was more appropriate and convenient in the new, small apartment, they encouraged the public to identify good taste with restraint.' (2000, p.13). As previously mentioned, Sparke (2008) argues that, in the past, interior decoration was used as a way of connecting people to their homes and their private spaces. We can argue that designing domestic spaces according to personal taste was not entirely possible for people living in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. Living in standardised flats which could only accommodate standardised furniture that could be bought only in fixed ensembles therefore meant everything was already designed for them and people did not have much choice. As Interviewee 1 confirms: 'There were pre-designed catalogue rooms. If you wanted to buy a big cabinet wall it came in one ensemble with other furniture…If you did not like it, you would not have anything.' (See Appendix A).

Society and socialistic design

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the EXPO in Brussels in 1958 was an excellent success for Czechoslovak Design, Pištanek (2018) points out that the exhibition managed to persuade the western visitor that even socialist countries can be developed and perhaps they are not even that desperately behind. However, the reality of life was far from the presentation. Majority of the celebrated exhibited designs never made it to mass production or people's homes (Pištanek, 2018). On the other hand, Pištanek (2018) argues that the international success in Brussels influenced both directions. Outwards, it advertised the

country and showed the potential. Inwards, it put the spotlight onto the disproportion of the false image it was presenting and the reality of living (Pištanek, 2018). One can suggest, that the relationship between consumers and design had two main issues which were insufficient production and poor variety of design available.

As previously stated in this work, the look of domestic spaces during the socialist era can be described as uniform and almost identical. The opinions of the Interviewees who have experienced the regime differ. Interviewee 2, a male in his 50s, argues:

'….Everything was the same; everything looked the same, the kitchens, the living room ensembles…We were building a new house in the 70s and we went to visit our relatives. When we came there, they had exactly the same tiles in the bathroom as we had. I was asking my father: Why do we have the same tiles? We are building a new house, why don't we have something different? And he said that he found out what kind of tiles they were when he already got home. He was waiting for weeks for any tiles to arrive, he just had to take anything that was there otherwise it would sell out and we would not have any. We really could not choose. Even those he got from a friend from 'under the counter'. And we just had to deal with whatever tiles we had.' (See Appendix B)

Figure 21. Living room of author's grandmother (Photograph taken by the author, 2019)

Figure 22. Living room of author's grandmother neighbor (Photograph taken by the author, 2019)

On the other hand, interviewee 1, a female in her 70s states:

' We did not really mind having the same furniture. I can recall that there were only four types of cabinet wall ensembles, I was still able to choose something that I would like…'. However, she continues: 'It happened often that it was difficult to buy something by simply walk into the shop, we had to ask a friend we had in the shop to save one cabinet or sofa for us secretly… You would have to know when the stock was arriving and queue in front of the shop, for a chance to get something, but sometimes you would not even get it. ' (See Appendix A)

Interviewee 3, female in her 50s, argues: 'I would say what was good [about socialism] was the equality between people, there were not such big class differences as there are now. Even the fact that everyone had the same furniture and was only able to get the same products as everyone else added to that fact.' (See Appendix C). However, all interviewees did mention that in their opinion, the quality of the furniture and industrial design was very high and the products were very durable, many of them still in use now. (See Appendix A, B, C)

Contemporary perspective

Nevertheless, thoughts and memories of socialism are accompanied by feelings of nostalgia. The design of socialism is simply familiar. Many pieces of furniture and other designed objects represent memories of childhood or growing up for generations (Kančevová, 2018). Many movies made after the totalitarian era are very popular among people from Czechoslovakia. For example movie, Cozy Dens, directed by Jan Hřebejk in 1999 (see Figure 23. and Figure 24.) depicts the design and the way of living in socialist

Czechoslovakia perfectly. People love the movie so dearly because they can relate very well to the spaces shown on screen. They recognise the same cabinet wall or the same chair that they had in their home. Socialist Design could be characterised as a collective memory of people living in Czechoslovakia at that time (Kančevová, 2018). To the people, the design's specific aesthetic serves as a representation of the times that they come back to in mind with a positive memory. The wrongdoings of the regime tend to be forgotten (Kančevová, 2018).

Figure 23. Still from movie *Cozy Dens* (directed by Jan Hřebejk, 1990)

Figure 24. Still from movie *Cozy Dens* (directed by Jan Hřebejk, 1990)

Recent years showed a rising interest in the socialist design and aesthetic among the younger generation of artists and designers that have never experienced the Socialism first hand. It is essential to address how those contemporary designers who are writing books and curating exhibitions prove a newfound effort for more accurate presentation of the history of Czechoslovak design and erase the dominating notion that socialistic design was dull and unappealing, just because it was made during the totalitarian regime (Močková, 2016). On the contrary, many businesses are using the aesthetic of the socialist era as a marketing tool and invoke nostalgic feelings. For example, the socialistic graphics and

packaging design was a source of inspiration for Beer brewing company Zlatý Bažant who designed their new beer can packaging, taking precedent from graphic design made in the 1970s, benefiting from using familiar design that triggers nostalgic feelings of consumers. The brand was inspired by socialistic TV advertising and imitated the aesthetic, colour scheme, music, and narrative in their new advertisements. (See Figure 25. and Figure 26.)

Figure 25. TV advertising, 1960s (Milan Zmeškal, 2018)

Figure 26. TV advertising for Zlatý Bažant Beer (Zlatý Bažant, 2016)

Another example is The '100 Years of Slovak Design 1918 - 2018' exhibition which opened in 2018 in the Centre of Slovak Design in the capital city of Slovakia, Bratislava. The exhibition displays a carefully selected collection of works using various materials like ceramics, wood, glass, metal, textiles but also graphic design or children's toys. The curator of the 100 Years of Slovak Design 1918-2018 Exhibition and also the director of the Centre of Slovak Design Maroš Schmidt (quoted in Močková, 2016) states:

'We cannot forget that despite the greyish political situation, colourful design was made. Moreover, it was made by people- designers who did not have any privileges, quite the opposite; they were able to navigate through set restrictions and rules and still create unique designs in terms of form and construction.' (Schmidt, 2016).

In an article for the magazine Týždeň, Maroš Schmidt argues that Czechoslovak Design was heavily affected by the ideological pressures and the command economy introduced by the government. As he states:

'Design is the servant of consumption. It is its natural trait. It is the weapon of competitiveness, it needs a free market. The planned, centrally managed economy had negative effects on the quality of design…There was a lack of finances and support from the government. Nevertheless you could find objects designed in a unique way. ' (Schmidt, 2017).

On the contrary Uhrín (2018) argues that ordinary people do not share the same understanding and appreciation of the past as designers. Uhrín (2018) suggests that we are currently experiencing great demise and the era of disposal of the old design particularly from the socialistic era. The masterpieces of quality design work, such as armchairs of František Jirák, disappear in the process of redesigning old flats. He continues by stating that there is no moment of observation and appreciation of quality and historical value of those objects and often possibly last pieces of, at the time, famous armchairs are found in skips.

Conclusion

This dissertation has offered a look at design produced during the totalitarian regime during the Cold War years in Czechoslovakia. Despite the unfavourable and challenging position of designers, it is evident that Czechoslovak design has reached the ambitions and qualities of Western design and could be compared to the works of other world-renowned modernist designers. We can say that individuals such as František Jirák, were responsible for the great achievements of socialist design and lifting the standard of Czechoslovak design (Mazalanová, 2018).

Nevertheless, the political and economic situation created by the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s to 1970s has undeniably halted the development of furniture and interior design. What is more, the economic situation had an impact on society and its relationship with design. Command economy and state-regulated production resulted in insufficient production and a very modest variety of products on sale. As all of the interviewees agreed in their statements, that the insufficiency of stock lead to struggles for acquiring goods of everyday use including home furnishings which resulted in a sense of resignation towards the interior design of their homes (See Appendix A, B, C). In words of dissent and later the first post-communist Czechoslovak president Václav Havel:

'A centralised furniture designer may not be the most typical representative of the totalitarian system, but as one who unconsciously realises its nihilizing intentions, he may have more impact than five government ministers together. Millions of people have no choice but to spend their lives surrounded by his furniture. ' (quoted in Crowley, 2008, p. 134)

We can argue that politics can have significant effects on the design and work of designers. Even though the consequences of the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia were quite negative and restrictive to the creative freedoms of designers, one could believe moderate and sensible political intervention could also have positive effects on design nowadays, particularly relating to the global issue of sustainability in design.

The evidence gathered in this work suggests that the lack of products in the stores and lack of variety of the products offered, had its consequences on the possibility of articulating personal taste through design. The standardised furniture virtually erased the expression of the individuality of a person in their home. Previously quoted Crowley (2008) and Hubatová-Vacková (2018) share similar options on the placelessness and uniformity of homes in the socialist era. The situation of design in socialist Czechoslovakia can serve as an example of how a political regime can affect every part of life, including design. However, one could suggest that the field of design was truly a victim of the regime. The strict guidelines which designers had to follow, significantly limited their creative freedoms (Mazalanová, 2018). Designers were not appreciated and the profession of a designer was not widely acknowledged. It is important to mention the disconnection of the designers with businesses that refused to implement their propositions into production (Mazalanová, 2018). Kolesár (2018) argues that this disconnection was responsible for the lack of academic education in the field of interior and industrial design at that time, which arguably still prevails now and interior, industrial or product designers are underrepresented in Slovakia.

One can speculate that, perhaps the limited production and variety of products that this dissertation addressed as a negative aspect of the era, could also be perceived in a positive light. Kančevová (2018) suggests that the minimal diversity of products could have

resulted in creation of notoriously familiar pieces of furniture equipment that everyone can remember and recognise. Thus they serve as a symbol of collective memory and are becoming 'iconic' symbols of the era. As with most objects and designs of the past, the value of socialistic design is rising thanks to feelings of nostalgia. As Kančevová (2018) observes, the design does not represent or recall the political past and the difficult times of living during totalitarian regime. The pieces of standardised furniture become more the artifacts of memories and represent the aesthetic and the spirit of an era.

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Appendix A

Interview with Interviewee 1

Transcript with interviewee 1, female in her 70s

Q: How did you perceive the design during socialism, was it something that was important to you?

A: Well we chose based on what was produced, we ordered what we liked. It happened often that it was difficult to buy something by simply walk into the shop, we had to ask a friend we had in the shop to secretly save one cabinet or sofa for us. Similarly with rugs. You would have to know when the stock was arriving and queue in front of the shop, for a chance to get something, but sometimes you would not even get it. Same for special products like fridge or TV, we had to go to a different city to get that and we also had that stored away for us.

Q: How would you comment on variety of products on sale?

A: Well, there was, not that much but we could choose what we liked. There were pre designed catalogue rooms. If you wanted to buy a big cabinet wall it came in one ensemble with other furniture like sofa. If you had money, you could always buy something, but there was not a lot of money back then. Now you can go to the shop and if you have money you can buy anything you want. At that time, you had to have a friend in a store to keep something aside for you. Otherwise you would not get anything.

Q: If you wanted something more special where would you get it?

A: Well there was nothing too special on offer. Or you would go to Tuzex store. There were people in front of the shop already selling 'bony', and they were not cheap, they made business out of that.

Q: Did you mind that many households had the same furniture? Did you think about what was on offer in the western countries behind the Iron curtain?

A: Not really, it was all that was on offer. If you did not like it, you would not have any. We did not have many options, we lived with what we had.

Q: Looking retrospectively at the design of that time, what do you think about it now? Do you feel any nostalgia? Is there something you miss?

A: The quality was very good, we still have all the furniture we bought back then, and the fridges or TVs lasted very long, compared to now.

Appendix B

Interview with Interviewee in 2

Transcript with interviewee 2, male in his 50s

Q: How did you perceive the design during socialism, was it something that was important to you?

B: I was aware of it, there were some pieces that I really liked, but the issue was that there was so little of it on offer but also produced. The design at the beginning, like 50s- 60s was really nice and of good quality, but there was not a lot on offer only few wardrobes or sofas. Every house looked the same.

But later the quality of the furniture worsened, I guess there were new cheaper materials, but that was a lot later, maybe 70s - 80s.

Q: How would you comment on variety of products on sale?

B: As I said before, there was not a lot on offer. So people went crazy after the Tuzex store foreign goods like jeans or cars. That is where I got my first real calculator from brand Sharp, I still have it stored somewhere. In other shops, everything was the same. There was just one or two versions or brands of something.

When people wanted to stand out and own something more exclusive they had to go to Tuzex. But the goods on sale there were very expensive, for example cars- very few people could afford them. But it was a way of state to get money back to them. You could not exchange dollars you had for example from a relative in America into Czechoslovak crowns, you could change it to bony and then shop in Tuzex.

Q: If you wanted something more special where would you get it?

B: Of course almost everyone wanted to have something a little more special or different, but the problem was there was nothing. People would be glad that they got what everyone else had because the stock was so insufficient. Everything was the same, the kitchens, the living room ensembles…even those basic things were difficult to get because there just was not enough of them.

Some furniture did not even get to store, there was maybe one on display but it was impossible to get because everyone has booked it through their friends, they asked them to store it for them. If you did not have a friend in a shop you would never get anything.

Some people would queue in front of shop for hours when they knew that stock was coming. Even overnight. The stock just was not sufficient, empty shops were quite a normal thing.

Q: Did you mind that many households had the same furniture? Did you think about what was on offer in the western countries behind the Iron curtain?

B:Yes I did notice that at that time. I can tell you a story. We were building a new house in the 70s and we went to visit our relatives. When we came there, they had exactly the same tiles in the bathroom as we had. I was asking my father: Why do we have the same tiles? We are building a new house, why don't we have something different? And he said that he found out what kind of tiles they were when he already got home. He was waiting for weeks for any tiles to arrive, he just had to take anything that was there otherwise it would sell out and we would not have any. We could not really choose. Even those he got from a friend from 'under the counter'. And we just had to deal with whatever tiles we had.

Q: Do you think it was possible to express your personal taste through your choice of design during socialism?

B: Well, if you really wanted to stand out and put so much effort into finding something special for your home, maybe you could. But then there was the danger of being too different. In that time, the society was all equal, everyone had the same opportunities, everyone had the same living room. If you had something very special, it would mean that you are better than others, people could envy you and the political regime did not favor those that were trying to defy the system.

But of course there were class differences, my friends whose parents worked in higher position in their jobs obviously could afford better things or the things that were 'under the counter'. Those things were reserved for the higher class. The ordinary people did not have that money.

Q: Looking retrospectively at the design of that time, what do you think about it now? Do you feel any nostalgia? Is there something you miss?

B: The quality was really good, and now I can appreciate the design a bit more and I realize that some of the things were nicely made. Regarding the western goods- you don't miss what you don't even know about, like the things that were designed and sold in the west. I do not feel any nostalgia, I do not mean to say that everything was wrong, but the life was not good, compared to the freedom that we have now.

Appendix C

Interview with Interviewee 3

Transcript with interviewee 3, born 1967

Q: How did you perceive the design during socialism, was it something that was important to you?

C: I think I did not mind the look of socialistic design, I was happy with how our interiors looked. I did have more interest in it in late 1970s when I became more invested in what my parents were buying and I would rearrange the furniture in the house.

Q: How would you comment on variety of products on sale?

C: By the time I got any word in decisions at our home, there was some variety of products on offer, but the problem was there was not enough furniture produced to meet the demand. There was maybe one cabinet for display but there were not any for sale…If we really wanted something we sometimes had to go to a different city to see if they have it there or by arranging with friends so they would keep it aside for us.

It is true that the production was regulated, it was set that this factory would produce only this amount of products…and that definitely was not enough for the whole country

Q: Did you mind that many households had the same furniture? Did you think about what was on offer in the western countries behind the Iron curtain?

C: I did not care at all… maybe I even felt good about exactly because I felt like we are all equal. Because I lived in a village, information about the west did not really reach me at that time. When I was much older and moved to the city, I did find out about western music or

fashion. But as I was getting older of course I had the desire to have something more special and differ from others. I saved some money to buy a nice fabric from Tuzex shop and had a dress sewn for me. That was one of the ways how we could be different, through fashion.

Q: Do you think it was possible to express your personal taste through your choice of design during socialism?

C: Well I think yes, I think you could. Maybe you could have selected few pieces to have a more minimalist style…

Q: Looking retrospectively at the design of that time, what do you think about it now? Do you feel any nostalgia? Is there something you miss?

C: It was very good quality, I have to mention that. But I would also say it was functional, I think it was working quite well. I do feel some nostalgia, I have many happy memories. I would say what was good was the equality between people, there were not such big class differences as there are now. Even the fact that everyone had the same furniture and was only able to get products as everyone else added to that fact. There was no envy between people.