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In Search of a Humane Environment: Environment, Identity, and Design in the 1960s–70s

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This article explores how designers and artists working in Soviet Estonia sought to assess and rethink the relationship of the man to his/her surrounding environment. At the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s various attempts to imagine a new kind of humane environment appeared as a response to modernization. The creation of a new integral living environment—the main task of Soviet design proclaimed by VNIITE—included aspects of social agency, and of educating and empowering the user. The conceptions of integrity and humanity, central to these new designs, were developed against the background of a return to the early writings of Karl Marx as well as to the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s.

Key Words: Environment, Soviet Design and Architecture, Marxist Theory of Design, Humane Space

As we all know, the main problem of contemporary culture is the human environment. Or according to a more primitive scheme: the city—man. This is the problem upon which the possibility of human life on this earth is dependent.

—Leonhard Lapin, Kaks kunsti

In a postwar and post-Stalinist Soviet society, man’s material environment became particularly important (Buchli 1997). Its integral design “for the realisation of the most progressive social ideas” became a national priority (Gens 1972b, 8). Integrity was one of the ideas and characteristics meant to separate the Soviet environment from the West and aid in overtaking it. Subjected to capitalism, Western design was thought to induce constant consumption, while Soviet design was free to focus on creating a harmonious material environment—a truly humane space.

for living—supporting harmonious human relationships (Soloviev 1973, 34). This perspective became increasingly important within the context of the expanding artificial environment during the development and spread of new technologies, which gave cause to think about these changes—the mediation of a new technological civilization and protection of human nature within it (Sarap 1975, 19–20). Soviet design, which was neither held back by the interests of capital nor pushed forward by the desire to increase profits, was aimed at transforming the environment and the human, while educating consumers and users and empowering them (Sarap 1975, 55–60). The creation of a new integral living environment was based on the idea of synthesis, which at first simply stood for the synthesis of different modes of art into a single harmonious whole—the involvement of art in architecture and the formation of public space—but which soon expanded beyond the medial synthesis into a demand for an increasingly total joining of different scientific disciplines, for a “total design” involving the environment and human activity (Olep 1972).

This essay deals with new visions of space, human environment, and its organization that appear at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s, mostly as a response to modernization and the official rhetoric regarding a synthesis of the arts. The emphasis is on theoretical argumentations and experimental projects—visionary fields rather than the realities of the built environment. I would like to make these conceptions of integrity and humanity more complete, as they are the background for the reorganization of the environment, and to understand how these ideas changed over time, especially at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s.

My examples are from the periphery of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Estonia. Soviet visions of space and concepts of (material) environment have attracted much interest in recent research. The focus of these studies, however, has been on Russia with its centers Moscow and St. Petersburg, while non-Russian Soviet republics remain unexplored. At the same time, Baltic states occupy an exceptional position: the less restrictive situation allowed artists to realize unique experimental projects like the exhibition series Space and Form.

First, I shall deal with visions of a new environment based on formal experimentation, where investigating elementary (geometric) forms and structures became the basis for organizing environments. Such (formal) solutions were, for example, propagated by the first Space and Form exhibition held in 1969, which is the basis for much of the discussion in this article. Next, I will look into experiments in spatial practices, certain innovative spatial conceptions that emphasized

2. Soviet design had a double role: emphasis was placed, on the one hand, on being different from Western design, and on the other, on the improvement and competitiveness of Soviet products. Learning from the West was thus justified and recommended, because the Soviet economy was dependent on foreign currency and thus on growing exports.

3. In 1956 Nikolai Bulganin, then premier of the Soviet Union, had announced the launch of the “scientific and technical revolution.” Industrialization of housing alongside other key sectors was one of the important engines of Soviet modernization after Stalin (Pavitt and Crowley 2008, 167).
a new relationship between space (the environment, architecture) and its user. In the last part of the essay, I will analyze the expansion of ideas of synthesis and total experience on the basis of Leonhard Lapin’s conceptions and their implementation in Sirje Runge’s work during the 1970s.

**Modernization: A Synthesis of the Arts**

After Stalin’s death new values in approaches to architecture tentatively emerged, starting what has been understood as reinstating modernism (Kodres 2002, 130). This was made possible by Nikita Khrushchev’s (1993) speech at the Second National Congress of Builders in December 1954. In a speech, which stood for the beginning of the Khrushchev thaw (promising to set the society back on the Leninist course), the first secretary of the party encouraged builders to employ industrial methods in construction, develop modular building types, and renounce embellishments (or “excess” as Stalinist décor was now called).

The rationalization and industrialization of construction, for the most part, provided hope for an increase in productivity—the issue of the material environment was primarily a political topic, and modernization in construction was brought on by the postwar lack of living space. Thus, this (re)turn to modernism was determined by economic, not aesthetic considerations; the idea of simplicity and functionality was instrumentalized by planning institutes (Gerchuk 2000, 85–8). Modernist architecture became an important tool in the rational restructuring of lifestyle, which was more often than not justified with rhetoric corresponding to the modern age (89–90), and rarely with constructivist principles or the productivist conception of nonhierarchical material culture (Starr 1971). The contemporary form’s objectives of “rational beauty” were in accordance with the objectives of production: easy to produce and available to the masses/as widely as possible (Ivask 1973, 20). Victor Buchli has compared the rupture in ways of living that started at the end of the 1950s to the “cultural revolution” of the 1920s, demonstrating that at the center of this break was the material environment and lifestyle where the formation of the “new Soviet man” was thought to take place, but also that this was an attempt by the Communist party to exert control over the domestic sphere. Although the rhetoric that followed the reforms emphasized the

4. For many architects, this would have without a doubt seemed like a turn backward, but as recent studies have shown, this (re)turn was very ambivalent and debatable (see Bocharnikova 2014, 84–106). Also, terms like “modernism” and “functionalism” were generally not used. Until the end of the 1960s, only “contemporary style,” “contemporary Soviet architecture,” or “socialist architecture” were mentioned. These terms were used because of a need to retain a crucial difference from the West. Regarding the term “socialist modernism,” see Reid (2009).

5. In November 1955, the State Committee for Construction (Gosstroi) published the Resolution of the Central Committee and USSR Council “On elimination of excesses in design and construction.”
democratic nature of this new rational way of living\(^6\) and the humane nature of the new (complete) environment, which helped man reach a harmonious “self,” the “modernist” reforms of the Thaw were for the most part disciplinary and less liberating (Buchli 1997, 162).

In Soviet Estonia, as in the rest of the Soviet Union, new housing complexes and small apartments were constructed, as these had become a significant part of the dominant planned economy (Crowley 2009, 235). Despite their economic size—according to regulations the smallest single-room apartment had to be at least eighteen square meters, and the largest four-room apartment could not be larger than sixty square meters (Ojari 2004, 48)—these light-filled and hygienic apartments were still the epitome of progress, even though the bleak and monotonous environment of the new developments became the typical “Soviet landscape” (Crowley 2009, 234–5). Journals like Kunst ja kodu (Art and Home), founded in 1958, offered schemes for how to furnish tiny standard apartments—for example, instructing readers on where to place the TV set, radio, or piano.

Nevertheless, the course toward modernization reevaluated the Soviet avant-garde as a precursor of Soviet design and revived its idea of art as something that shapes and organizes the environment, and with it a new way of life (e.g., Lissitzky 1989). While Buchli demonstrates a similarity with the 1920s, when revolutionary art was supposed to produce a new space-environment and objects, which in turn were to teach and implement a new Soviet way of living (e.g., Arvatov 1997), the connection he builds is still much more conceptual. Even though the aims of transformation in the 1960s were slightly different from those in the 1920s\(^7\)—and the expression more influenced by jargon—the more recent discussions concerning socialist design were still heavily based on previous conceptions.\(^8\) The emphasis put on the role of art (aesthetics) in forming the human living environment and shaping the individual through the configuration of everyday material surroundings and facilities corresponds to constructivist and productivist ideas regarding the introduction of art into life. Dissatisfaction with the form and quality of (industrially produced) commodities, which were subject to constant critique and the improvement of which was tied to the greater involvement of artists in the industrial production process (Tomberg 1961), was in fact tied to broader issues regarding the role of design in

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\(^6\) The rhetoric used during Khrushchev’s time to legitimize modernism included several ideologically and aesthetically loaded terms such as contemporaneity, purposefulness, youthfulness, openness, freedom, and democracy (Reid 2009, 101).

\(^7\) Unlike in the earlier era, the debate during the 1950s and 1960s was not focused on the complete dissolution of the domestic sphere (Buck-Morss 2000, 190–205). For the dematerialization of Soviet daily life and domestic sphere see Cubbin (2014).

\(^8\) In the 1960s, the constructivist avant-garde of the 1920s had been rehabilitated step-by-step as the predecessor of Soviet design. This point of view was represented, for example, by VNITE (Vsesoiuznyi nauchno-issledovatel’skii institut tekhnicheskoi estetiki or All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics), which claimed to be the inheritor of the traditions of VKhUTEMAS. The institute played an important role in the revival and study of the 1920s Soviet avant-garde.
contemporary Soviet society. This was not solely understood as providing everyday objects and environments with a more “comely” face, but was also tied to the moral, social, and political responsibilities of the designer-artist. The necessity for an accentuated intervention must then be understood as far-reaching, as a demand for conceptually new objects and environments.

The Socialist Culture of Things

The debate over the “socialist material culture” returns, as previously mentioned, to the 1920s, when the need for determining a specific, decidedly Soviet—proletarian—art (architecture, design) practice corresponding to Marxist teachings, leading to invention and theorization of new kinds of useful material objects that would transform everyday life and consciousness under socialism, was initiated. One of the most well-known advocates and theoreticians of proletarian production art, Boris Arvatov (1972; translation mine), emphasized the need to socialize artistic methods and thought that artistic creation was a tool for educating the individual, who would consciously organize the forms of his activities and material environment. By this he did not mean decoration, but purposeful organization of all spheres of life (23). Furthermore, while in a bourgeois society, formational and organizational activities remained the prerogative of a small caste of art specialists, the proletarian society made methods of artistic organization accessible to everyone. “Colors, sounds, words, etc. in their spatial and temporal forms are the object of every person’s activity,” wrote Arvatov (22; translation mine). Just as every person must be capable of walking and talking correctly (qualitatively), they must also be competent in organizing the world of things that surrounds them, thus making them a harmonious individual (22). Arvatov looked forward to the abolition of the distinction between work and play, between technical object and cultural subject, between professional and amateur. He wanted to restore the lost connection between the artist and the living environment within the new conditions of modern industrial production. Thus, restoring the unity of aesthetics became the aim of socialist aesthetics—to involve all the senses and, in addition, to become active. Art was the force—the action—that intervened and transformed life (Kiaer 2005, 69–70). The “socialist things” made from this perspective overcame alienation. In Marxist theory, alienation is a consequence of capitalism, capitalist labor relations, and commodity fetishism in particular (Marx 2008, 86–7). Socialist things, as Arvatov (1997, 126) imagined them, would be transformative, changing people, shaping “gesticulation, movement and activity.” Design became less about perfecting the form of things and more about the shaping of the form of relations.

Humanism as Practice

The return that took place during the 1950s and 1960s led back not only to Lenin but also to young Marx. The humanism in Marx’s early work was rediscovered and
this was supposed to become the basis for the rebuilding of a communist society, from which Stalin’s rule had become distanced. This humanism was centered on the revaluing of subjectivity and the creative individual (Lauristin and Vihalemm 1998, 1391).

Marx saw human nature as something not universal and unchanging. Instead, he understood it as something that was the result of societal relations. However, human nature was also determined by how man expresses himself and transforms the world through creative practical activities. These sensory-activity pursuits (with production forces and relations acting in the background) are vital for the formation of human nature because human beings are by nature free, purposive producers (Werckmeister 1974, 12–5). But this kind of free production—self-realization—is inhibited within a capitalist mode of production as the division of work results in the distancing of the human-producer from the product of their activity. The joint and self-sufficient experience of the working process is broken, resulting in the worker becoming alienated.

This condition of subjugation became topical during the 1960s. Naturally, this was mostly a problem of capitalist society, but it was not limited to it (Blum 1969). The reasons for alienation were seen as authoritarianism and bureaucracy as well as dogmatism, which hindered not only scientific development but also the more general manifestation of human creativity. In the hope of establishing “true socialism” and an open democratic society, overcoming alienation came into focus and art/aesthetics had its special role in this. Art was often seen as the only possible non-alienated labor in contemporary society where man performs in their full reality as a creator (Scanlan 1985, 309–10).9

Although the fevered discussion about the role of the aesthetics in society at first occurred in the context of applied arts, it exerted pressure also on dogmatic realism. This was also the basis of French Marxist Roger Garaudy’s 1963 book Realism without Borders, which was translated into Russian in 1966 and provided grounds for lively discussion in the Soviet Union. However, more important than the expansion of the concept of socialist realism were Garaudy’s thoughts on the function of art in the contemporary society. Namely, Garaudy tasks art with the possibility of humanizing the world, overcoming alienation and creating new values. All this was supposed to be achieved in a “practical” manner (Kangilaski 1965, 171–3). Art is not a mirror that reflects reality, nor a screen

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9. Marx himself operated within two conceptions of art. While typical artistic production practiced in a society was instrumentalized and stood (like religion, politics, and morality) at the service of said society and power, “true” art was characterized by the opening of human nature, and by free self-realization. True art could only exist in such a way in a society without divisions of labor. Also, it would not have been practiced by people who specifically chose to be artists but rather by those who painted, among other things. The emancipatory utopia of this kind of society (communism) is the multifaceted person (Marx and Engels 1990, 33).
onto which one projects reality. Instead, it is a plastic model\textsuperscript{10} of reality (1717–8).

With that, the emphasis moved from the “superstructure,” a common vulgarized Marxist interpretation of art as a passive reflection of socioeconomic relations (the base) to artistic activity as a part of “transformative practices,” which were similar to other forms of productive consciousness and work. The focus was not on the ideological content of art, but instead on its practice.

The restoration of the “human dimension” (and the superseding of alienation), in light of Marx’s early writings, meant not less than developing spaces where creativity can unfold, and generating situations where everybody can participate in the organization of material and in the creation of a new living environment, creating integrity and unity, not in the illusory external form of objects, but in practice and in human activity (Kantor 1967, 192–4).\textsuperscript{11} Philosopher and sociologist Karl Kantor, whose theory of aesthetic production relied on Arvatov’s ideas, as well as on Marx’s early writings, defined socialist design as the production of harmonious societal relations (Cubbin 2015, 112–3). He did not consider design, or the “production art of the future” as Kantor called his theory of new design, a question of formal qualities, but saw it as a political and social statement.

Concern about “good form”\textsuperscript{12} is contrasted by an obligation to ascertain “true needs.”\textsuperscript{13} If such a critique at first seems to be directed against a desire and a cult of things, an urging for “reasonable and rational” consumption (Mirov 1966), then in light of the discussions mentioned before, this all acquires a slightly different meaning. It cannot solely be understood as an “education of taste” (Heynen 2005, 16–23)\textsuperscript{14} as it also involves a societal and socially engaged dimension. A monotonous environment and a bleak apartment became fields of experimentation, spaces for creative experiments, which could be used for developing new ideas of spatial formation that went much further than a “correct” or clever organization of furniture in a confined space.

\textsuperscript{10} In art history “plastic” indicates that it is a model made by using the means of art–forms, color, light, rhythm, and so on. A broader notion would be visual model, or artistic model.

\textsuperscript{11} For an account of Kantor’s theory of socialist design see Cubbin (2015, 89–129, and especially 115–20).

\textsuperscript{12} The concept of “good form” originates with the Swiss artist and architect Max Bill (2008), who had studied at Bauhaus Dessau.

\textsuperscript{13} Several articles propagating design raised the issue of true and illusory needs. For example, Bruno Tomberg (1961), interior architect, designer, and founder of the design department at the Estonian State Art Institute, demanded that committees be created in larger department stores that would control the quality of products on sale—to minimize their fetishist characteristics by eliminating all indecent/inappropriate products that could lead the consumer to satisfy the “wrong” needs.

\textsuperscript{14} Hilde Heynen has described the process of institutionalizing and integrating modernism, which took place both in the West and to the east of the Iron Curtain. According to her, after World War II, modernism became an architectural style spreading examples of “good taste,” but not social ideas.
Module: The Building Block of a New Kind of Society

These searches for new strategies and methods of spatial organization led to experiments with form. Elementary form and standardized detail were the general themes of the exhibition *Space and Form* in 1969, focusing on the issue of using elementary standardized forms in nonstandard ways, offering individualized solutions in terms of forms, materials, and colors. The series of exhibitions, initiated at the end of the 1960s by the interior decorators’ section of the Artists’ Union of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR), aimed to provide new analyses of spatial organization and a material-spatial environment that would go beyond the limits of everyday practical tasks, to develop creative initiatives and thinking, where the completeness of objects or functional concerns didn’t matter (Asi and Tamm 1969). From 1969 to 1984, four incredibly popular exhibitions were held at the Tallinn Art Hall. Each of these exhibitions followed a special, yet broadly defined concept, and the display spaces were designed accordingly, creating spectacular, total, or even unfamiliar environments.

The design of the initial exhibition, according to its theme, was based on a strict geometric modular structure, its primary motifs being the square and the sphere (fig. 1). All participating artists were required to form their individual presentations via these shapes, deriving cubes, rectangular prisms, and cylinders from them.

In the context of Eastern European art histories, there has been an emphasis on a different role of design, namely in supporting the restoration of the form as an artistic quality that had been incriminated by dogmatic realism as “formalism” (Eimermacher 1991, 128; Kodres 2002). The exhibition series in question also has been interpreted as “resistance” to ideological pressure on Estonia to, with the aid of “good and tasteful design and products,” confirm that the country belonged to the West, further distinguishing it from the Soviet Union (Kodres 1999). However, studying the exhibition carefully as well as the discussions around it offers a slightly different perspective.

The first exhibition demonstrated flexible forms and modular furniture that could be (at least possibly) dis- and reassembled endlessly. As Udo Ivask

15. Every participating artist-designer was assigned to one “cubicle” and some artists worked in teams. That said, the level of collective activity varied greatly, with some teams engaging in true collaborative design or conceptualizing and others using the shared space to exhibit works by several different people. The minutes of the interior-design section meetings show that although a jury was present, artists were mostly left on their own regarding the nature of their contributions. Proposals were rarely discussed and, if at all, mostly to analyze the feasibility of executing the work and its materials.

16. Although the initial idea was not to showcase finished samples of a practical and beautiful spatial setting, in reality the furniture and object samples outnumbered the rest of the exposition. The display structure took up only half of the exhibition. The more distant rooms displayed furniture and object samples, produced especially for the exhibition. Later, the furniture was bought by the Ministry of Culture in order to help cover the exhibition’s expenses.
(1973, 20), an architect and another important advocate of a contemporary understanding of design, noted: “A technically, geometrically and functionally successful formal experiment can be realized as a vase, furniture, space, and even an entire city.” Exemplary for the employment of modular parts was the element-furniture with x-legs by Bruno Tomberg (fig. 2). The furniture could be combined and used effectively as seating elements or a table, and could be transposed into other tasks and functions.

Manfredo Tafuri (1976, 105–7; 131–3) has described the modular system and its promise of flexibility as a reflection of the profit-oriented logic of capitalism—where everything was “open” and capable of being restructured and (individually) organized at any time, and the romantic idea of the participation of all became the ideology of the flexibility of capitalist accumulation. However, this conception of flexibility and indeterminateness was also true in regards to a society with a planned economy. In his exhibition analysis, Ivask (1973, 20) brings out the advantages of “mobile furniture”—a minimal number of elements allowed for the rationalization of production methods and decreasing production time, save on material and time—economic production and reproduction, thus also giving it a high social value. Modularization and transformability promised flexibility, which could be used to create a more humane environment, meaning a space more

Fig. 1. Space and Form I, Tallinn Art Hall, 1969. Design concept by Maia Laul, Kärt Voogre, Eha Reitel, Saima Veidenberg and Taevo Gans. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.
adaptable to individual needs and desires that might change over time. All this was achieved while keeping with the economic efficiency that coincides with standardization.

Thus, the focus of the first exhibition was largely on the restructuring and modernization of production in the 1960s where the idealist logic of elementary forms, which provided space with a rational and streamlined look, came threateningly close to the logic of the conveyor belt. Here, geometry is consistent with the demands of and the capabilities of industrial production. However, they did not exceed the framework provided by the industry and thus came to deploy industrial norms within the home. Furthermore, Ivask (1971, 11) believed that the search for a geometric clarity and simplicity of forms suited to a human scale would result in a highly organized harmonious environment and aid in avoiding entropy in the home, stairwell, street, or society.

Fig. 2. Bruno Tomberg, Element-Furniture, 1969. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.

17. Ivask (1971) compared such systems with children’s building blocks, which can be aligned or placed on top of one another to create an endless number of combinations. When furnishing his own home, Ivask based everything on a sixty by sixty by thirty centimeter “modular box.” Ordinary veneer-covered boxes made of blockboard and stained dark brown were combined to make tables, shelves, seating, and beds.

18. Warnings against entropy in the everyday artificial environment—the proliferation of “visual noise” that dulls the senses and diffuses attention—along with the criticism of the chaotic
However, to see this ideology of flexibility in terms of the expansion of forms of societal control only is to miss how this furniture—everyday things—was intended to activate the user to engage creatively with his/her everyday surroundings. Modular forms with adjustable parts were closely connected to the user’s interests and needs, promising constant interaction and participation for the user-consumer—for example, by reorganizing the forms. The possible solutions depended fully on the users’ imagination. Thus, both flexibility and a multifunctional character placed demands of creativity and intelligence on the users while they were manipulating the furniture, forcing them to act.

The stringent formal economy of the designs in the exhibition is reminiscent of suprematist and constructivist programs. As for constructivists, the construction of objects was not an expressive process but a universal one, based on scientific method and analytical knowledge (Margolin 1997, 90–1). Tomberg and Ivask too emphasized that form should not be so much the result of aesthetic quality, but the result of finding a solution to a problem or task (Ivask 1973; Tomberg 1973). When considering the challenges faced by design, Tomberg was not that interested in the comfort and enjoyment that the consumption and ownership of things might offer. Instead, he considered the intelligence and rationality of consumption and the responsibilities and initiative of the user. This consideration was made possible by uncomplicated furniture that dictated its uses as little as possible. Providing and developing modular building blocks instead of ready-made furniture was supposed to enhance the active involvement of the consumer. Thus, besides the fact that such furniture was ideal for a small apartment, it also provided a potential for (inter)activity—an active user could alter and transform the furniture according to different needs, the furniture now understood as nothing more than a “system of equipment” (Cubbin 2014, 13). Rather than passively consume, the ideal Soviet user would interact with objects actively and meaningfully (Margolin 1997, 94). Elementary forms and modular standardized components stood metaphorically for openness and mobility, and for a whole range of possibilities through which users “could realize their own social agency” (Henning 2007, 37–8). Therefore, the exhibition Space and Form was not focused on formal issues separated from practice.

disorder and formless nature of modern life, were the backdrop for the new design discourse. The designers saw their task as controlling and managing this chaos.

19. This also meant that the working methods of designers had to change. The design curriculum composed by Tomberg emphasized the modularization and flexibility of form. Starting off from one simple form, the students moved from the planar level to packaging, from a simple everyday object to complete environmental solutions (Sarapik 2014, 337).

20. The involvement of the consumer/user was also fostered by the insufficient quality of the apartments, which required reworking along with completing the interior decoration. Tips for this were published in magazines like Kunst ja Kodu (Kurg 2014, 118).
The Exhibition: Experiments with Spatial Practices and Experience

These attempts to mobilize the user through objects were soon applied to space. A new approach to space and its organization was achieved with a second exhibition, *Space and Form*, in 1972, designed by Tomberg. This exhibition abandoned the rationality and comprehensiveness of the first one and focused on experience. While the first exhibition’s economical structure based on the horizontal and the vertical could be perceived organically and was easy to navigate (Summatavet 1972), for the second exhibition Tomberg created a kind of immersive experiential environment, combining numerous vertical surfaces and employing painted and mirrored surfaces (fig. 3). The model shows a labyrinthine structure with narrow aisles, which some visitors perceived as claustrophobic (fig. 4).

The exhibition space was created by the “abstract” play of form, light, space, volume, rhythm, and color—using all these elements not in a passive but in an active way. The shape that dominated was that of a crystal: the main element of the exhibition was a shield created by combining a rectangle and a triangle, which in turn allowed for the creation of a particular labyrinthine structure (executed by Saima Veidenberg). The effect of the labyrinth was multiplied with mirrors, which were also used to involve the viewer with the space directly while at the same time creating a disjointed spatial experience. The color mode was based on the movement of the color specter from red and orange tones to violets, from warm to cold tones. This approach was used to join the entire hall into a single composition, containing areas with different emotional charge and spatial effect (Ivask 1972a).

Attempts at destabilizing the viewer’s experience and manipulating perceptions were present in several other installations, which offered a play with mirrors, pulling the viewer down into the depths of the space only to push them out. A similar effect of “uncertainty” was created by Taimi Soo’s spatial installation: a room painted with different colored stripes blurred the distinction between walls, floor, and ceiling. Cylinders placed on the floor or hung from the ceiling and accents that stopped and broke the movement of the stripes created the rhythm of the space (fig. 5). The environment created by Virve and Juta Aunre also forced the viewer to directly engage with the space, to “directly physically perceive the volumes of the space organised by form (colour and light)” (Gens 1972b, 9).

These spaces came close to the “disorienting Constructivism” of El Lissitzky’s exhibition spaces (Gough 2003). With the use of colors, moveable wall panels, and other devices, Lissitzky attempted to engage the viewer physically into the show, to disrupt the traditional contemplative relation to art. In his retrospective statement of *Demonstrationsräume*, Lissitzky (1967, 362; translation mine) claimed his concern to
be the mobilization of the viewer: if traditionally the viewer was lulled into passivity (by walls of pictures), his design—the room—was to “make the man active.”

At a discussion held in the Artists’ Union following the second exhibition, Estonian art and architecture historian Leo Gens called the exhibition a successful experiment in the spirit of Soviet design. Gens stressed the importance of the fact that the display was not intended to present viewers with new spatial decoration principles or perspectives for the further development of domestic culture, and as a result did not offer furniture samples.21 The exhibition, then, was not merely

21. Such design exhibitions would have been dangerous in the Soviet context. Modern furniture and commodities were scarce in the distributive network, so it would have created confusion had viewers started to demand them for the decoration of their own homes (Gens 1972a).
guiding the expectations of a passive consumer, but was giving shape to active consumption, which Arvatov had pointed out forty years previously.

Western art (and design), which was intended for private contemplation and consumption, encouraged passivity in individuals, whereas socialist objects were to advance human action. They were to be dynamic, flexible, and affective, and able to adapt instantly to the needs of social practice (Arvatov 1997, 126; Margolin 1997, 102). Through these qualities, socialist objects would assist in developing, amplifying, and enriching humans’ sensory, physical, and mental capacities. As such, they would differ from completed, fixed, static, and consequently, “dead” capitalist commodities (Arvatov 1997, 122). Socialist material culture was supposed to create

Fig. 4. Space and Form II. Photo of a model. Photo courtesy of the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.
critical and conscious subjects and thus make them resistant to the lure of consumption (Kiaer 2005, 68).

These ideas were not less current in the 1960s when the Soviet Union started to promote consumer culture (Reid 2013) and the passivity that comes with it was starting to take hold in society. A harmonious individual is an active individual. The environment and the objects within it must promote this activity and not create the illusion of harmony within a “beautiful” home while hiding the actual fragmentation. The task of the designer-artist was to humanize the environment. This meant not so much embellishments that would enhance the

Fig. 5. Taimi Soo, Striped Space, 1972. Photo of the reconstruction is from 2006, the Estonian Art Museum (2006).
bleak surroundings, but transforming the individual into an active subject, making them dynamic, challenging the user's intelligence and creativity, and empowering them.

The exhibition reviews, which without exception emphasized the exceptional and innovative nature of this event, also brought out the aspect of spectacle. According to Gens (1972a, 11), the most important characteristic of the exhibition (and its objects) was the playfulness. The exhibition was a spectacle directed at the viewer, but instead of mobilizing their habits, it focused on changing patterns of thinking. This activation was achieved through a playful and speculative approach—for example, blurring the line between artistic tropes and the utilitarian object or, concerning the environment of the exhibition, complicating and “interrupting” the viewer’s perception of space. Orienting oneself within it did not occur (semi)automatically; instead, it called for the activation of all senses. Gens relates it to contemporary life: “In the street, in front of the TV set, in the cinema, at the café, the viewer is used to kaleidoscopically alternating impressions, where unexpected associations of form, color and light teach him/her to see the moving and changing spatial structure. By depicting and programming new, complex visual associations that take shape in the contemporary world, the exhibition led the way out of the closed, petrified environment” (1972a, 11; translation mine).

The labyrinthine structure of the exhibition mostly involved the viewer directly in testing their unmediated sensory experience and spatial consciousness. The unfamiliar, ambiguous information, dispensable details, and disruptions made the environment lively and hindered smooth orientation in it, actively involving the viewer and thus altering the traditional viewing/consuming situation. Russian design theorist Viacheslav Glazychev has likewise argued that the exhibition, as a specific mode of address, must provoke the audience ("with every element, every cube") so that the viewing becomes a process, the viewer a coauthor taking part in the work of the exhibition, contributing to its “making” (1972).

For “genuine” design, according to Gens, use has to be uncomfortable to some degree, creating a critical distance between the object and user. Gens brings out Tomberg’s bow-back chair (fig. 6), which has armrests that are just a bit too high and which Gens describes as “irony at cosiness and elegance”

22. Guy Debord (1996) adapted Marx’s theory on the fetishism of consumer goods in his analysis of contemporary societies using the concept of “spectacle” to stand for the mass media. Spectacle is a self-sufficient control mechanism of contemporary society that places people in the role of the passive consumer, becoming the basis for alienation. However, Gens understood spectacle differently: he saw it as performance that has been inscribed with estrangement, and therefore as a means to entice the audience and create participatory interest. It is thus more similar to the theatrical “situations” that Debord saw as an adequate political practice for interrupting the “spectacle.” Debord and Gens recall what Sergei Tret’iakov (2006) had outlined decades previously when he called for a regime that breaks down the barrier between the artist as creator and the spectator as consumer.
Gens seems to be imagining objects and spaces that in a sense acquire a dynamics, a “life” of their own, and resist easy consumption. It is possible that Gens had in mind Arvatov’s elaborations on “socialist things” as “active material objects,” liberated from the enslavement of commodity status (1997, 123). At the same time he takes up a Russian futuristic idea with roots in Russian formalism—to break the automaticity of perception. When the futurists...

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23. Tomberg himself expressed that he wanted to design a chair that did not dictate how one should sit in it (interview with the author, 2 June 2005).
declared that the reader must clash with the language, then at this particular exhibition the user in a way clashed with the object, not knowing how to use it or what its purpose was. This experience in turn opened up something new, a fresh perspective. Several objects and installations in the exhibition asserted this moment of the transformation of the artistic trope. These objects do not imply a comfortable existence. Instead, they become agents of heightening the awareness of the user. Naturally, this push for a heightened awareness could be understood within the context of various campaigns started at the end of the 1960s that condemned the “bourgeois” desire for things and the abundance of “inessential” objects. Still, this particular stance seems slightly different.

Gens was probably acquainted with the Russian formalists, especially Victor Shklovsky’s ideas on art as a form of experience, and in particular as a defamiliarizing, estranging, and renewing experience. Shklovsky (1965) understood art as a certain technique of estrangement (ostranenie) that disturbs mechanical vision through complicating the perception processes, thus creating a new gaze, “a new way of seeing.” Art would help by sensitizing perception blunted by everyday routines, thus awakening a more conscious perception.

Gens thus saw the interruption of purposely disfigured objects as possibly transformative, and the artistic activity of design as an integral part of social practices, which should result in change. Soviet design, as it appeared in exhibitions of this sort, was meant to further critical and contemplative stances by creating distance through a sense of estrangement in the user, instead of alluring and “completely engaging the user, turning the viewer from a conscious person into a sleepwalker” (Brecht 1972, 276). Quite the opposite, design was supposed to shake the viewer loose from “a life poured into things.” The act of breaking the automatic nature of perception stood for a significant moment of emancipation when the consumer would become aware of the space that surrounded them, the objects that made up their environment, and how they themselves wanted to live (Kantor 1963).

The organizers of the exhibition also emphasized the wish to abandon traditional object samples and avoid presenting off-the-shelf stereotypes (common to fashion magazines), which the viewers could mechanically transpose into their home environment. According to Tomberg (1972), they wanted to “disrupt passive consumption, a highly widespread tendency in an information society, and guide the consumer towards the path of independent thinking.” They wanted to help people overcome helplessness in decorating their home, promote

24. Regarding the development of estrangement from an initially aesthetic and formal concept into a socially engaged “new way of seeing,” see Lachmann (1984).

25. This type of “artistry” that creates estrangement is similar to Brecht’s V-effect. Gens must have been aware of Brecht’s work, as Brechtian theater was eagerly propagated in Estonia during the 1960s. There was high demand for changing these experiences into something more immediate and intense (Epner 2010, 18).
individual skills in solving their specific needs. The goal of these exhibitions, which were meant for a small circle of professionals and at the same time aimed at a wide audience, was to promote creativeness (Asi and Tamm 1969). The “complex organization” of the exhibition, its dynamic environment was aimed at the viewer, forcing the physical activity in space. The perception of objects and spatial relations themselves became a creative process, evoking the situation of co-authorship, where the automatic perception was replaced with active imagination (Lehari 1972, 13).

The design historian Kaia Lehari has argued for the importance of form and composition (not differing much from Shklovsky). Designing an environment is, according to her, primarily an organization of perception. On one hand, people need clear and univocal information to orientate them within space and to turn human behavior into something automatic and infallible. However, the basis for a truly humane environment is to the same extent the breaking of the automatic nature of perception through the ambiguity of information, which is achieved by veering away from a strictly functional and constructive order, and introducing random and unnecessary changes: “An aesthetically expressive form/environment changes the perception of objects and spatial relations into something similar to the creative process, calls forward collective authorship, a moment of creating with the artist.” To organize the optimum spatial environment, Lehari (1976) stated, “we would first have to learn to create a complicated order that involves both the regular and the random, the practical and the seemingly coincidental.”

The idea of design represented by the exhibition and its theorists is thus political: (socialist) material culture creates critical and aware subjects. Here, the role of objects moving away from a directly utilitarian—habitual and thus passive—function was humanist not purely in an aesthetic sense as emotional counterpart to the technicism and rationality of the surrounding reality (Nugis 2013, 90). Truly, the reestablishment of humanism—“the human measure”—is understood in a completely different way—in consideration of how much “action” the environment granted. These were the “most progressive social ideas” the exhibitions followed. The attempts to engender a transformation in the sensation of space,

26. To avoid, as Tomberg (1972) observed, such common negative situations as buying a desk to decorate the living room even though no one in the family is involved with writing, or decorating the living room as a dining room although the family eats in the kitchen.

27. The shift from the first exhibition’s rational user-space relationship to the more experimental, disorienting, yet engaging spaces of the 1972 exhibition reflects the transformation in ideology as a consequence of the wider crisis of modernity in Soviet Union in the early 1970s. Rationality and positivist reasoning, as well as the narrow focus of Soviet modernization policies on technical criteria, did not come in for severe criticism until the 1970s. The technocratic belief in scientific progress as the best mechanism for resolving social problems, including the organization of people’s daily environment, dominated the 1960s. But eventually this tenet came to be seen as the problem. The idea of the artist taking command over industrial production then gained even more relevance and was reframed as the idea of the artist who disrupts the rationality and functionality of the modern environment (Lapin 1973).
movement, and order were meant (albeit less radically than the ventures of the avant-garde) to change the consciousness of the users—without dreaming of effecting a transformation of society—and to make them more sensible and critically aware.

“A Synthetic Environment”

The homogenization of the living environment resulting from the industrialization of the construction process became a topic in both professional circles and the press soon after, and continued through the 1970s and 1980s. Already at the end of the 1950s, the synthesis of the arts program, aimed at “humanizing” the dull, new, and “emotionally poor” architecture, was called to life (Lindpere 1999, 203–4). The addition of artistic decorations to industrially produced buildings was a substitute for the prosaic exteriors of new buildings. This was supposed to help “enliven” the new architectural environment—to animate it plastically—and thus bring it closer to the people (emotionally).

However, this type of synthesis became a subject of critique rather quickly and a search for more organic opportunities for synthesis to replace this artificial joining of art and architecture began. Art needed to become a more integral part of architecture, thus moving toward the concept of monumental art centered on space itself. Thus, at the end of the 1950s, some theorists argued that monumental art created a space, a material and visual environment, that had the power to organize people’s bodies and transform their consciousness. This was thought to happen through the use of abstract concepts such as proportion, rhythm, and color relations. Form and color would articulate space and create a “field of influence,” which would affect people “unconsciously”; they just had to be present in the “harmonious” space to be affected (Reid 2009, 106).

At the same time, the real potency of design was significantly diminishing in the early 1970s, as a consequence of the economic crisis. Tom Cubbin (2015, 193–4), in his recent study on Senezh Studio, has pointed out that the retreat from economic reforms (introduced in 1965 by Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin in order to promote limited market competition between enterprises) had a noticeable effect on designers’ status, marginalizing their already fairly extraneous roles in production and forcing them to withdraw from industry into experimentation. For Estonian designers, it became attractive to work not in industry but at the State Cooperative of Art Products (ARS), which designed and made only unique objects. This shift toward individuality was the reason Tomberg, the main initiator of the above-mentioned exhibition series, distanced himself from the series after its third edition in 1976. For him it became “too experimental,” moving away from “real concerns” into subjectivity and thus arbitrariness (from an interview with Tomberg, 2 June 2005).

28. The results of the program were modest for several different reasons. Apart from the rather meagre means for executing the project, it was also hindered by a lack of communication between artists and architects. For an architect, art was a threat to the architectural whole. Artists however were often led by the misconception that they had been brought in to correct architecture (Tolli 1984, 24).
This approach became even more prevalent from the late 1960s onward, resulting in changes to the concept of environment itself. New electronic means available for artists accompanied and strengthened this approach, providing even better instruments for the creation and realization of “synthetic” environments. The new conception of environment based on information theory included not only physical space, but also social and medial aspects, and substantially influenced the relationship between environment and design. Design was to regulate the environment (not to create new objects) and thus limit chaos and entropy (Ivask 1972b). The scale of what was considered “synthesis” had changed considerably and did not just stand for a blending of different modes of art. The act of designing involved knowledge from other areas such as sociology, ergonomics, and so on, on the basis of which a whole was created—a “decent living environment for humans” (Kurg 2014, 143).

Leonhard Lapin was one of the eager propagators of new environmentalism. In several presentations and texts, Lapin (1997, 16) argued that the main aim of art (bearing in mind all of the different spheres of art from design to happenings) should be the creation of a new living environment. He confronted the official “synthesis of arts” discourse with the concept of “synthetic architecture” and demanded that all other modes of art be included in the creative process of an architectural form: “The new architecture is a synthetic art, which in its form ties philosophical ideas, the research and experiments of sociology, psychology, theology and theatre, the formal aesthetics of the visual arts, the achievements of the scientific-technical world and the possibilities of industry” (Lapin 1974, 57; translation mine). The idea referred to the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, which was developed in the mid-nineteenth century and then expanded by the avant-garde into a “total artwork” involving the environment and all spheres of human activity.29

In the following years, Lapin (2013) pursued this concept of synthesis further, linking it with the new artistic practice. He addressed the need to create a new aesthetic system developed in accordance with the contemporary industrial reality and with technological progress. Lapin demanded that art regain its social objectives like the production of new environment. Lapin’s vision of future art practice directed his attention to monumental art and became concretized when he was appointed as designer of the survey show on twentieth-century Estonian monumental sculpture, organized by the Exhibitions Department of the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR in 1976. On his initiative, a small section of “new work” was added to the main exhibition, featuring contemporary art: models and architectural projects, kinetic objects, abstract paintings, and prints. Lapin, appropriating the

29. The art nouveau concept of Gesamtkunstwerk was also propagated by the journal Art and Home, to which Leonhard Lapin was a frequent contributor. This idea had a particular meaning within the context of the Eastern European private sphere. The 1970s were characterized by a withdrawal into privacy, which compensated for adapting to the system. The home became an expression of singularity not different from art nouveau. The role of everyday life and the “culture of objects” as a place of creativity and liberty was thus ambivalent.
unlikely official genre of monumental art, reshaped it in an extensive effort to redesign public urban space, an integral and (syn)aesthetic environment ("Uudislooming monumentaalkunsti näitusel," 1978, 35). In this respect, Lapin’s environments were much like Tatlin’s (1989, 97) “monuments of the new era,” not meant to be objects of veneration but fully operational sites used for various social activities—including lecture rooms, sports halls, information centers, print shops, cafeterias, and other social venues. Analyzing the built environment in the city center of Tallinn, Lapin (1980, 20) emphasized the need for a new monumental art practice. He argued that the daily life of ordinary citizens had no urgent need for single heroic monuments, but rather called for integrated space. His *A Monument to Tallinn*—a 345-meter-tall monument located in the new residential area of Mustamäe—illustrates, if in a futuristic way, the concept of “new
monumental art” that moved away from objects (monuments) toward integrated space (fig. 7).

On each story of this suprematist-style monument—a tree symbolizing the unity of nature and new technological environment—a period of Tallinn’s history would be displayed using audiovisual multimedia. At night “from 18 to 6 single elements glow colorfully and split away to outer space. Unrepeatable spatial situations are regulated by a computer” (Kurg and Laanemets 2008, 173). In a way, while the monument dissolves, generating unrepeatable spatial configurations, mobility and transformability are brought to their limits.

This new type of synthesis that moves from merging different modes of art to a broader—total—understanding involving the environment and all spheres of human activity (all the while overcoming the opposition between art and technology) is present in the work of Sirje Runge. Runge, who was married to Leonhard Lapin at the time and was using the name Sirje Lapin, was interested in combining colors in design with other—sensory, aural, verbal, kinetic, motoric—means and contemporary technological achievements to create “all-encompassing ephemeral atmospheric environments” (Lapin 1975, 19). Ideas from the Space and Form exhibition gained a much broader interpretation when applied to urban space where the town infrastructure is joined with phenomenological space, seeking to engage “all the senses and the entire central nervous system” (Lapin and Lapin 1997, 290).

The most significant and ambitious experiment to imagine this kind of urban synthesis is Runge’s diploma work, “Proposal for the Design of Areas in Central Tallinn,” which reconsidered the possibilities of art in the arrangement of the urban living environment from the end of the 1950s (Lapin 1975). Blending constructivist principles with a postindustrial program,30 the project investigated the means for reconstructing various peripheral locations—derelict industrial areas, dilapidated courtyards, and disused plots—which Runge envisioned turning into a dynamic, integrated urban environment.

The project included three kinds of interventions: first were urban “decorations” that consisted of repainting the neglected buildings’ facades with decorative patterns, much in the spirit of traditional “synthesis of the arts” (Lapin 1975, 6–7). The second part consisted of modular constructions composed of nodes, stairs, elevators, levels, and boxes that could be differently combined. These constructions, up to six stories in height, were equipped with cinema and TV screens, music boxes, information boards, and kiosks strongly reminiscent of constructivist portable kiosks and stands (fig. 8).

In the cubic, cylindrical, or spherical boxes one could relax, listen to music, meet and spend time with friends, or just climb in and around the structures. The third urban intervention envisaged by Runge consisted of “urban design fantasies” that approached the qualities of the environment more abstractly (expressing general

30. Runge can be seen following Archigram. For the sake of the context of this essay, I will limit my discussion to certain aspects.
ideas and the most secret desires of the society, and at the same time manifesting them in a concrete way). While the convertible modular systems could be applied to different locations, fantasies corresponded to and reacted to the specificity of the site, to its history, and to the “spiritual” qualities of particular places.

Keeping with the spirit of the Gesamtkunstwerk, Runge’s statement explained her vision of a new urban environment: “A cultured urban environment, regardless of its history and structures, should in the end form an aesthetic whole” (Lapin 1975, 3). At the same time, she emphasized the importance of engaging the urban population with the communicative whole of the city: “The city cannot be seen as just an utilitarian machine, it is also a focal point for man’s material and spiritual resources... The city cannot be saved from its rationalist monotony solely by an
architecture with beautiful facades and forms, solitary parks, squares or trees. The city contains many communication systems, which should all be integrated to its design” (19).

The city that Runge imagined—not a static composition, but “a multimedia applying all technical means available” (Lapin 1975, 19)—was enticing and enthralling, constantly changing (lighting effects changed the constructions depending on the seasons, time of day, and weather) and engaging (it was possible to “inter-communicate” with other city-dwellers or to retreat to a private music box with a headphone system). The human scale of the environment was shaped by plenty of spaces (and events) that did not determine the activity of the viewer but instead encouraged free participation. Of course, an environment saturated with advertising, cinema, television, and music must have felt rather desirable in a context devoid of mass entertainment (names of Western stars such as Frank Zappa and David Bowie could be found on the signs attached to the structures). However, could Runge’s spectacular environment just be a “dream world”—a total whole where the difference between art and life, between aesthetics and information, between people and their environment disappeared because everything from communication to manifestations of life had been aestheticized?

Runge’s diploma work is consistent with new views on design—total design, as it was propagated at the time within the department of industrial art. The object of design was not so much things (items or buildings), but the relationships between them, creating events and situations, designing human relationships (Keskküla 1974). Runge’s structures were intended not only to decorate and “fill” temporary breaks in construction, but also to transform the public space, to turn neglected or abandoned urban territories into dynamic points of entertainment and communication. Even though consumption tended to create frustration rather than satisfaction within Soviet society and often resulted in longing and jealousy versus satiation, it can still be said that equating the possibility to consume with the freedom of choice is just as nearsighted. Runge’s work is ambivalent and controversial. On the one hand, she wished to be the creator of a new spectacular environment. At the same time, Runge was deeply influenced by Marshall McLuhan’s theory of a new electronic age, especially his understanding of the role of technology in the changing world (and in the changing of the world). Her concept of an integral environment was inspired by McLuhan’s descriptions of a new sensuous world with moving images influenced by simultaneity and nonlinearity where the user’s paths of movement are not predetermined or their actions rationally organized. According to McLuhan, these kinds of spectacular spatial experiences integrate people into an environment, which thus becomes an extension of their bodies, resulting in communication that involves the whole fabric of their being (1964, 20, 36ff.). Only such intense synesthetic moments of totality are able to defeat fragmentation and alienation.

When Runge spoke of the necessity of creating a new type of environment involving all “the audio-visual tools at the artist’s disposal,” revealing her
distinctively theatrical conception of space, she also reiterated what constructivists had called for previously. This type of environment, which engages its users emphatically, involving their vision, hearing, and touch; turns people’s relationship with the world into something more active and integrated; and aids in overcoming alienation, was theorized in Soviet avant-garde circles in the 1920s by artists such as Lissitzky (1967, 362–3). According to McLuhan, a “non authoritarian” environment demands greater engagement from its user, making them a creator and a collaborator. Runge’s aim was a specific “complicated order” that was intended to create irrational and chaotic moments within the functional organization of the city and thus result in greater engagement, in a more (inter)active relationship between man and his surroundings. She did not argue for the control of “chaos” by means of total design, but instead insisted on involving irrational details in city planning. She was interested in interrupting the functionality of modern urban space, in complementing it with “irrational”—i.e., cognitive and sensual—moments. The new synesthesia was to overcome (space) fragmentation and alienation produced by the modern rational culture. One of her “urban design fantasies” contained colorful chimneys in a labyrinthine park to be constructed on the site of a former power station. The aim of the renewal was the reintegration of a neglected area into the city. The park’s chimneys would emit colorful and pleasantly scented smoke—a new kind of fountain that also sought to signal the historical legacy of the location (Lapin 1975, 16).

**Conclusion**

This article followed changes in the vision of the Soviet environment, reflecting on the shifts and transformations in how the human environment—a central topic in the 1960s and 1970s—was imagined and conceptualized. The article examined three approaches from the late 1960s to mid-1970s that tackle the relationship between environment and user in modern industrial Soviet society.

Following the period of the thaw, with its worship of rational values and technocratic approach, expert knowledge was challenged by the idea of user participation. The didactic tone that dominated at the beginning of the 1960s, and that prioritized contemporary taste and “actual needs,” was only a decade later replaced with involvement of the individual through the creation of variable modules that they could choose to combine to meet their needs. The idea of interactivity gained a whole new meaning as its focus moved from a pragmatic sensibility and engagement to active imagination and deeper involvement. A humane environment was not created by the appropriate arrangement, but instead by the mobilization of the mental energy of the user, and their intellectual and sensuous capabilities. It was no longer considered necessary to direct the arrangement of furniture; rather, the emphasis was on supporting empowerment. Thus, making a more humane environment and overcoming alienation through art did not solely mean decoration or a symbolic mediation of monotonous urban spaces where individuality or
recognizable signs offered people the chance to identify with the environment.31
Instead, design involved a much broader field of meaning, namely the possibility for realizing human creativity. If art’s role was to protect human nature from automatism, then it also meant its liberation from illusions and habits. The experiments described above, including the exhibitions in the *Space and Form* series, claimed that our environment, including domestic space, was a field of creative practice, that even everyday life was a place for expressing creativity. To achieve humanism, an opportunity for openness was needed, something to present the possibility for active participation.

Designing for user choice and active participation was developed further in experiments that sought to create a synesthetic environment, as described in the third part of the article. Designers attempted to create a space that would address the whole body of the user, and engage their entire central nervous system. Again, this new human environment of total involvement would be not a “passive container,” but interactive, programmed for discovery and not instructions, in order to make users aware of it, to make them coproducers, to make them act.32

Last but not least, the newly conceptualized environment offered an alternative approach to viewing and perceiving city space. Developing environments that would activate the user/viewer was antagonistic to the stagnation of the Brezhnev years, and to the overall societal withdrawal into the private sphere. Creating ambiguity instead of order (and as a result, involvement in depth) challenged not only bureaucracy, but also a society stagnating as a result of indifference.

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31. This understanding of humanization is characteristic of environmental psychology introduced during the 1970s (e.g., Heidmets 1978, 4).
32. Indeed it is the artist who, in McLuhan’s (1964, ix) vision, helps raise critical consciousness by creating “anti-environments,” or “counter-environments,” “that provide us with the means of perceiving the environment itself.”
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